雨の日のアイリス

Iris on rainy days

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電撃文庫

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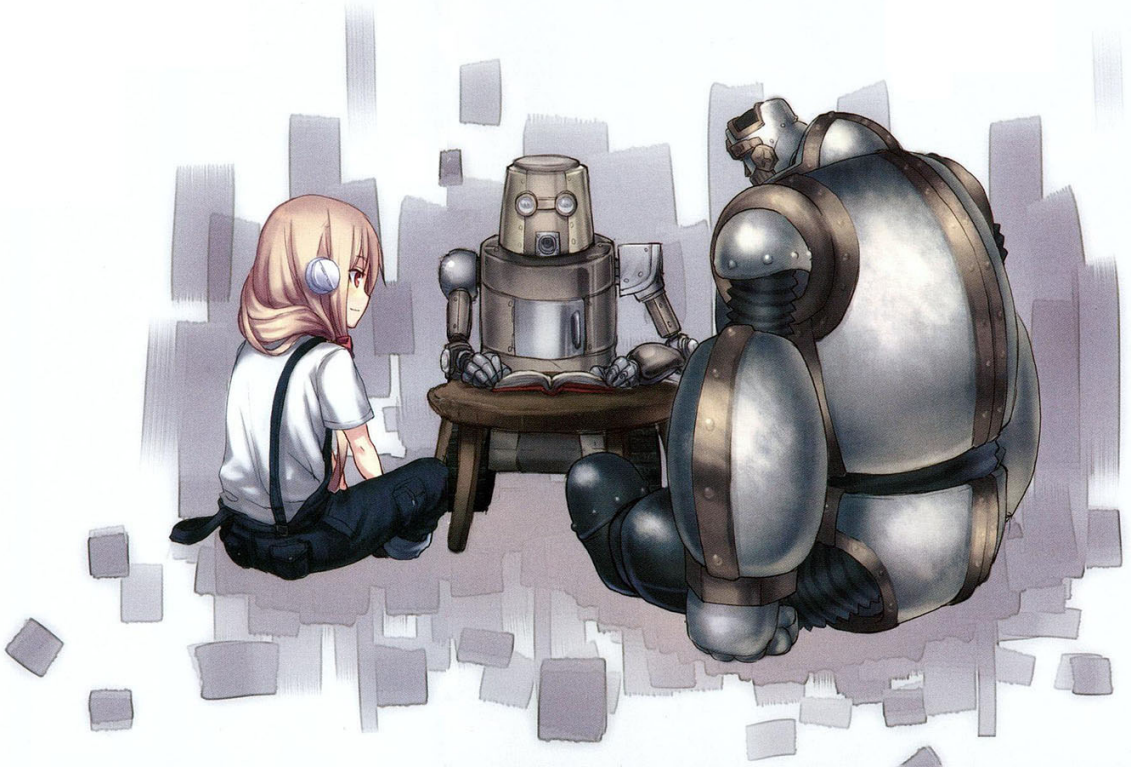
She was living a peaceful life with her master, but then one day...
IRIS RAIN UMBRELLA
House Robot working for Dr. Umbrella
WENDY VON UMBRELLA
Head researcher in robotics

Under a driving rain, she made the acquaintance of two robots that she will never forget.
VOLKOV GALOSH
Former military robot working alongside Lilith
LILITH SUNLIGHT
Working robot on a construction site

"Now, I still wonder myself if I have been of any use for Darke," thought Flo. Still deep in thought, she said to herself, "If I'm not useful to him anymore, then I should as well disappear."
Flo Snow, Darke's servant
Extract from the novel *Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke*

In the dead of the night, because they love stories, they are reading books. Thus, they learn to know themselves.



Prologue

Here are the remains of a scrapped robot.

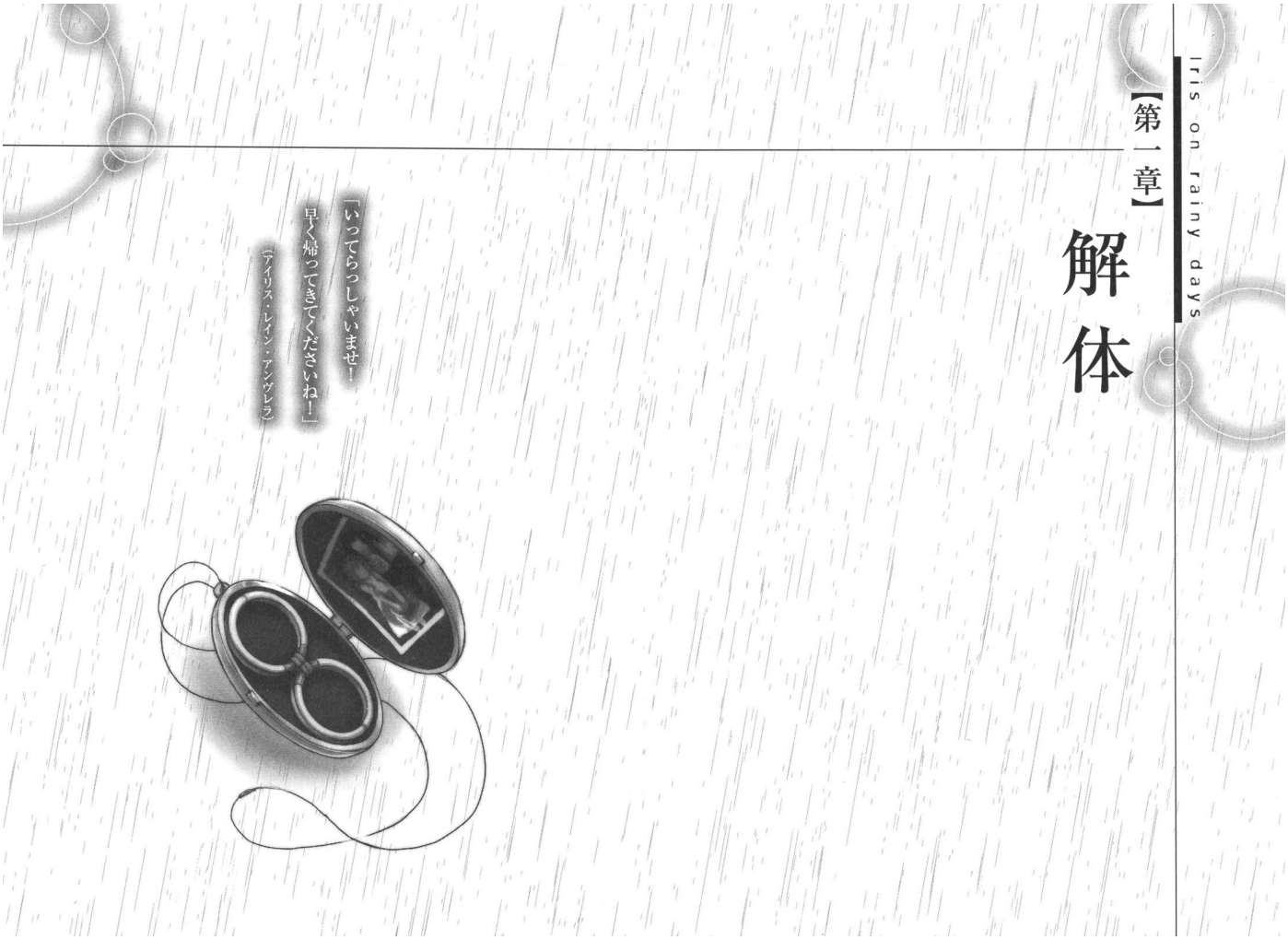
Its left arm has been torn away with its left shoulder. The remaining right arm bends in an unnatural direction. The lower body, having been torn off, is missing. From its stomach, tubes and organ-like parts spill out messily.

At first glance, this robot seems no more than a piece of scrap. But once upon a time, it led a happy life, serving a family and being loved by its master.

HRM021-α, its registered name is Iris Rain Umbrella.

Based on the data in the mental circuits of HRM021-α, the following record was reconstructed by Ralph Ciel, of the First Robotics Laboratory, Oval University.

Chapter 1 - Dismantling



“Take care on the road! Come home earlier!” (Iris Rain Umbrella)

Dismantling: 7 Days Before

At the center of the Venus Fountain Plaza, there stands the statue of a stunning goddess.

She has slim limbs, skin as white as silk, and a great figure. Today, the goddess still wears a gentle smile on her face, silently observing the surrounding crowd.

Oval City had once burned in the flames of war. When most of the town was burnt to the ground, only the goddess statue miraculously survived without so much as a scratch. From that day on, the statue of the goddess became a symbol of hope and revival, and has been protected as the most important cultural asset of our country.

Beside the 170 centimeter tall goddess statue, the fountain is blooming flowers of water, in rainbow colors. On the dark tea-colored benches that were placed around the fountain, old men chat with each other, children play around, and lovers proclaim their love for each other. The harmonious scene looks like it came from a painting.

—it's indeed similar.

I hear a squeaking sound start, and I adjust the pupil function of my visual system. After focusing on the white goddess statue, I sigh lightly.

The goddess statue looks like Professor. Professor is the top researcher of robots, Doctor Wendy von Umbrella, Ph. D. I'm proud of her: she has a tall figure, beautiful, luscious, black hair, and wears glasses with a sleek, silver frame that suit her very much.

While thinking of Professor's shapely form, I stare blankly at the goddess statue when the sweet sour smell of circlet cigarette floated over. I start to turn the angle of my neck, confirming the source of the fragrance.

The person who sat on the bench, smoking a circlet cigarette, is a middle aged man wearing a dark blue suit. He is reading today's copy of Oval Daily; but just now, he started to peek at me every now and again. I use a gentle smile to greet him, and he shyly shifts his gaze.

Circlet cigarettes, by the way, are a product used for smoking cessation. The shape is as suggested by the word 'circlet', and the size is about the size of a circle made with thumb and index finger. When people get one out to smoke it, the ring-shaped cigarette immediately straightens, and then the tip of the cigarette can then be lit.

Although it is a replacement for tobacco that was made to occupy the mouths of smokers who are trying to quit, recently more and more smokers are buying it because they like the scent. The most popular circlet cigarette is the type that combines two circlets into the shape of the number 8. This type of cigarette can be split into two halves, half of it to smoke, and the other half to hold the ashes.

I know about all of this because Professor Umbrella loves this type of circlet cigarette.

— Mnn.

I shift my gaze to the goddess statue again, and suddenly start to ponder. The goddess statue looks very similar to the tall professor. However, I just have this feeling that it is lacking 'something'. Every time I see it, I would have this uncoordinated feeling in me.

When this meaningless question surfaced in my mind, time's up.

— In five minutes, you will be unable to reach home by the scheduled time.

The inorganic, electronic voice of my mental circuit starts urging me to hurry home.

— Alright then, it's almost time to go.

With my back to the plaza, I start to walk home quickly. The shopping basket in my right hand is stuffed full of the ingredients for today's dinner, and a glittering silver La Bier fish is tied to my back, causing the pedestrians who pass by to turn their heads around when they see it. Their surprise is only natural, since they're seeing me carry a huge, one meter long fish while I'm only a hundred and fifty centimeters tall myself. But after they notice that I am actually a robot, they showed an expression that suggested understanding.

Differentiating between humans and robot is very simple. The ones that have a round antenna on their ears (It looks really like an earphone) are robots, the ones who don't are humans. "It's the robot from the Umbrella residence!"— a voice clearly projects into my auditory system. So, I smiled back at the person. Though robots used in families is not uncommon, since Professor is a famous person, I get noticed sometimes when I walk in the streets.

After walking about ten minutes from the Fountain Plaza, I arrive at the Umbrella residence. Looking at the blue, ivy-covered door, I say: "Certification number HRM021-α, Iris Rain Umbrella. I'm back." After the electronic voice says "Certification complete, please enter", the big door opens silently.

The Umbrella residence is a grand mansion. There is a courtyard here the size of three station squares, and it is a large residence comparable to mansions of administrators. The red brick outer wall makes people understand the grandeur of the history and traditions of the Umbrella family.

After entering the mansion, a luxurious hall can be seen immediately. The sunlight entering from the skylight passes through the chandeliers, giving out a colourful radiance. The carpet spread on the floor is similar to the style of the ones in old castles. Large paintings are hung on the walls. Each is worth enough to provide a luxurious life.

Passing through the corridor with the exquisitely shining floor, I first place the fish in the freezer. I feel much better after that, and I start to walk towards the west-most room on that floor— the research room. The research room is stuffed full of materials and tools, the clean but chilly space is like a snowy field on a winter day.

Sitting on the creamy white bed near the wall, I first check my status meter.

Battery level 82.50%, waste in body 1.73%. The energy level is more than enough for labour, but Professor had ordered me to recharge. So I will charge.

After sterilizing the long, thin tube with a chemical twice, I open the lock on my wrist, showing the connection plug. If I made a mistake in the steps, the black machine oil might splatter all over the room, so I must be quite careful.

I insert the tube into my right and left hand in succession, then pressed the switch on the machine. Electric power and additional lubricating oil slowly flow into the connection plug on my right wrist. At the same time, the tea-colored waste in my body is sucked out of my left wrist.

The introduction manuals for robot maintenance usually say that the system is similar to humans using IV drips. Really though, the system excretes and cleans the body's internals, so it is more like artificial dialysis than IV drips.

I look up while charging my battery, staring at the metal sheeting on the ceiling. The mirror finish reflects my whole body.

There's not technically much difference in gender in robots, but I appear to be a girl. My age is set at fifteen. I have blue eyes with delicate eyebrows and maroon, slightly wavy, shoulder-length hair. The length of my limbs is similar to Professor's, and my face is that of a beauty, just like professor— I know it is so because Professor is always praising my cuteness - it's not just my opinion.

The maid costume that I am wearing was designed in a fairy tale style. A maid's headdress lightly waves on my head, while the cutting of the apron emphasizes the curves of my breasts. The peach coloured dress tightens at the waist, while the dress itself is quite loose, and would make people think of a wedding dress. Where did Professor buy such a lovely maid's costume, I wonder? Even now it's still a mystery.

After twelve minutes and one second, the process of charging finished. Battery level 99.93%, body waste 0.02%.

—Alright, target level achieved.

I jump down from the bed, leaving the research room. My destination is the kitchen, because I have to prepare dinner.

In the large kitchen that is not inferior to high classed restaurants, I start to make a Bill La Bier stew pot. There's a lot of pots, sinks and gas stoves here, but I would always cook at the left side of the kitchen. Professor is very rich, and she could even hire over ten, or even over twenty chefs, but she didn't hire any up till now. Not only a chef, she didn't even hire other maids, and I have to handle the whole large Umbrella residence. I could only use all my effort, diligently finish the chores like cooking, washing the clothes and sweeping the floor.

I quickly cut the La Bier fish, and lightly pick up the pieces of peach-coloured fish.

—200.0025 grams.

While referring to the recipe searched from my mental circuit, I finish the preparations of making the Bill Labier stew pot. By the way, "La Bier" is a fish very similar to salmon, while "La Bier" is actually the name of a person. I'd heard that a fisherman called La Bier caught a large La Bier fish long ago, then he needed an entire night to finish the whole fish. His way of cooking is was to cut the fish into big pieces, then stew it with the spices— that's the origin of the La Bier stew pot. It sounds like a simple dish, but if you want to cook it well, there's quite a bit of technique involved. For instance, you have to accurately handle the fire and patiently scoop out the foam.

From the moment I pick up the kitchen knife, twenty seven minutes and twelve seconds have passed, and my job is done. I store the remaining food in the freezer. Professor doesn't have many visitors, so these leftover portions will probably go to waste in the freezer. With the large amount of ingredients bought and the large kitchen, the Umbrella residence is usually that wasteful.

As I complain in a small voice, an electronic voice rings in my mind.

— Professor Wendy von Umbrella has returned.

"She's back!"

I rush out of the kitchen, passing through the hall, and violently pull open the doors to the outside. My dress fluttering in the wind, I start to run to the forecourt.

— Professor! Professor!! Professor!!!

The person passing through the gate, is a tall, black haired woman wearing a jacket that is light like a swan, and looks incomparably beautiful although it doesn't seem like she has any make up on — my Professor walks over to me slowly. And then, she waves suddenly to me.

Not caring about the battery loss, I run with all my strength to the professor. I am running with the speed of a hundred meters in nine seconds, and emergency brake three meters in front of Professor. I am not sweating, or even panting, but my body is giving off heat like a steaming stove, as if my body has been lit up. The image of Professor swirls in my mental circuit.

"Welcome back, Professor!"

I open my arms while beaming, welcoming the return of Professor. While I am somewhat over-reacting, this is just a way of showing my love for Professor.

Professor looks at me, with a gentle smile. She puts out the fire of her circlet cigarette and keeps the ash tray. My olfactory system detected a sweet sour smell after that.

"I'm back, Iris. Have you been a good girl today, too?"

That is a somewhat deep, cool and quiet voice for a female. The silver framed glasses on her nose makes her wise face even more striking.

"Yes! Professor's Iris has been a very, very good girl today too!"

"Is that so. What about dinner?"

"It's the same as what I told you, a La Bier stew pot!"

"What a good girl you are."

Professor extends her right hand to me.

— Alright, it's coming!

I happily wait for that moment.

Professor's hand lightly touches the top of my head. She used a gentle, but somewhat rough movement to caress my maroon hair.

This is truly an incomparable happiness.

I look just like a kitten that had been caressed, making satisfied sounds with my throat. I enjoy the pleasure of contact with Professor's gentle hand, and the sweet sour smell of the tobacco that tickles the nose.

♠

Dinner time has always been the most nervous time for me.

Professor slowly scoops out a piece of La Bier fish from the pot. She continues to use a small knife to cut the fish, sticks a fork into it then swallows it with her rose colored lips.

Because of the chewing action, Professor's face is moving slightly. I stare at her face, slightly worried.

— Professor, how is it? Is it good? Hmm? Is it?

I ask repeatedly in my heart, waiting for Professor to express her thoughts.

"Hmm……"

Professor twists her neck. Then, my mental circuit suddenly cools down. Describing from the angle of a human, that would mean that a chill went up my back.

"E- e- e- errmmm, I- I- I- I- I- is there a problem with it?"

I ask in a rapid fire speed, feeling slightly dizzy. For Iris Rain Umbrella who is proud of her ability of doing chores, being told that my cooking is bad would be the same as questioning the meaning of my existence.

"To be frank……"

Professor raised one of her beautiful eyebrows, saying with an obviously displeased tone.

"To- to be frank?" I waited nervously for her next comment.

However, Professor's mouth slightly curls, a smile surfacing on her face. She says suddenly.

"It's really good."

I am quite shocked, and couldn't help but make an idiotic "…… Eh?" sound.

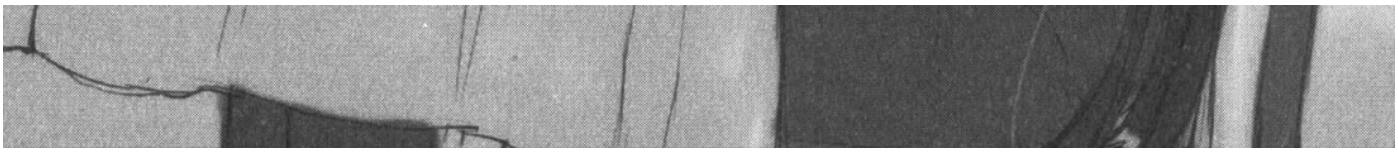
"Ah…… Eh? Aren't you disliking it……"

"No, it's very tasty. And the handling of the fire is especially good."

"……"

"Oh? What's the matter, Iris? Why are you showing me a tongue-tied expression?"

You can say that Professor is an S. The S in S&M. A sadist. She always uses these simple traps to trick me. By the way, this is already the twenty forth time. The pitiful thing about robots is that they even remember how many times meaningless things like this occur.



“Really, Professor! Haven’t I said not to make that kind of joke!”

I throw the napkin at Professor angrily.

“Oi oi, that’s too much of a waste.”

“According to your words, the La Bier stew pot today is the wasteful one! Telling me to buy a whole fish, what are you preparing to do with it!”

Professor casually answered “I’ll finish it after two days,” and continues to eat. I answer “You always lie……,” crumple the last napkin up, throw it, and it hits Professor’s arm with a plop.

“Mnn, it really is tasty. Iris is really good at cooking.”

Professor comments deliberately, and places another piece of La Bier fish into her mouth. Although I feel somewhat frustrated, seeing Professor enjoying the stew, a note of satisfaction appeared in my heart.

After dinner, Professor goes to the washroom. While cleaning up the dishes, I recall Professor’s childish actions, laughing for a moment, being annoyed for a moment, but a smile still surfaced on my face in the end.

Today, Professor is still pretty, likes to bully people, is gentle and stroked my hair.

— Mmm, right now I’m speechless with contentment.

The peaceful night slowly passes, and then it is bedtime. I change into my beloved pajamas with pictures of flowers on them, then knock on Professor’s bedroom door.

“Professor, sorry for bothering you.”

I walk into the room. As usual, Professor is wearing purple pajamas slightly open at the chest, and is lying on her bed. She has a circlet cigarette in her mouth. The sweat sour smell is mixed with a slight smell of peppermint, and the smell floated over along with the smoke. The slogan used on television is “The taste of your first love,” and I think that it’s quite apt. That’s right— it’s the taste of the first love to me. The love between

Professor and I— I really want to feel that too, but the only one in love is me, Professor is always calm.

I understand these feelings would only be useless, so it's better for me to be careful.

"Professor, smoking on the bed is too impolite."

"It's not against the law."

"And it could cause a fire."

"I never heard of cirgarettes causing fires."

Professor looks at the ceiling, continuing to puff out smoke. Ah, that's right, 'cirgarette' is another name for circlet cigarettes.

"The total data says that eight incidents occurred this year."

I block Professor's vision determinedly, looking at her from above. The smoke almost burned my eyes.

"How many times had it happened in Oval Town?" Professor continues to smoke.

"…… Zero."

"Then it's okay."

"But you can't use that as an excuse, Professor."

I stubbornly snatch the cirgarette away from Professor's mouth. "Ah, give it back!" Professor sits up, extending her hand to my elbow.

As revenge for Professor making fun of me during dinner, I run around the room while holding the cirgarette. Professor gets up from bed too, chasing me. I hide behind tables and chairs so that Professor cannot catch me. Although it's childish, there's still an undeniable charm to it.

After playing two short rounds of catch in the room, Professor says "It's time for bed" and takes off her silver framed glasses. She stares at me with her eyes like a colourful glass. Professor is a beauty when she wears her glasses, and she is still a beauty after she takes off her glasses.

—Ah.

The goddess statue isn't wearing glasses.

"What is it?" Professor stares at me from the bed. I lightly tilted my head, honestly speaking my thoughts: "Professor is indeed…… suited for glasses and cigarettes."

"Huh? Why are you suddenly saying that."

"No, that's just my thoughts. …… Then Professor, is it okay?"

This question means, "May I snuggle into Professor's blanket?"

"Be my guest."

Professor lifts up her blanket and waves to me. I say "Excuse me," then nervously lie down beside professor. After that, I curl up my body and raise my head to look at Professor.

We are very close together, and I can see myself reflected in Professor's pupils.

"Good night, Professor."

I bury my head in Professor's large, soft hills. It's so soft and has a nice fragrance to it.

Professor hugs me gently, stroking my hair. Then, she says "Goodnight, Iris" and kisses my forehead.

After changing my status to sleep mode, I enter the world of slumber.

I had a happy day today, too.

Six Days Before

"Thanks for your patronage!"

The voice of the butcher is full of vigor, as usual, and rang loudly behind me. I start to walk on the road that leads to the Umbrella residence. I carried an enormous La Bier fish on my back yesterday, while I'm carrying a tea colored leg of a cow and a white spring onion on my back today. I look like I'm dual wielding beef shank and onions.

I walk forward quickly, with the eyes of the pedestrians on me. When I think about it, the dinner menu of the Umbrella residence is always on display to the people of the city. It was La Bier stew pot last night, while tonight it's beef soup with onions à l'Oval.

Going around the corner and walking through the Venus Fountain Plaza, I arrive at Commerce Avenue.

Oval City is picturesque, with canals flowing around it and looks like an oval from the air. This area was formerly plagued by floods, but the population - of both tourists and citizens - has been continuously growing since the drainage system and sewers were completed. By the way, Professor's workplace – Oval University First Robotics Laboratory – is the tallest building in the city.

The robot research centre has almost entirely become a tourist destination, so the citizens of Oval City are quite tolerant of robots. At least there aren't signs saying 'Robots are Prohibited' hung in buses or restaurants. But even in a city like this, not everyone is tolerant of robots. Just now, some housewives who live nearby were gossiping "Look, it's that woman professor's robot" "It's so obscene……". I didn't listen to their conversation deliberately, it's just that I have a subroutine for automatically detecting sounds near me.

First, I must emphasise: I am an ordinary robot created by Professor for doing housework, and my certification number is HRM021-α. My job is to do all the housework and chat with Professor. There really isn't anything beyond that. It's just that many people like to gossip, and the rumours only get worse with time. Among the more malicious rumors is that the top robot researcher Wendy von Umbrella is a lesbian and has an unhealthy interest in robots modelled after young girls — that sort of thing. It's probably because Professor is single and has spurned all suitors that rumours like this appeared.

There actually are quite a few users who use female robots for "that sort of thing." Not only can I not deny it, but the profits from that market segment support a large part of the robot industry. Some rich people even buy quite a few robots of the same model, to create a 'virtual harem.'

That's as may be, but Professor isn't like that.

I've served her for three years and Professor has never made any sexual requests of me. She just doesn't do that sort of thing.

Professor created me because of her 'sister' who died in an accident.

One autumn day four years ago, the Umbrella sisters went on vacation together. Professor drove the car. On the way to their destination, they collided head-on with a truck that had crossed the centre line. The party at fault was obviously the truck driver, but Professor felt responsible for her sister's death. From that day on the Umbrella residence keeps no cars.

Since their parents died when they were young, the sisters had relied upon each other for support. The accident meant that Professor suddenly lost her one and only family member — her sister.

Her sister was Iris Rain Umbrella. And so that is my name too.

I am a 'replacement' for her sister. Similar to the circlet cigarettes that are a replacement for normal cigarettes, we are just counterfeits that appear exactly like the real thing. Every time my profile is reflected in Professor's eyes, she looks not for me, but for her sister in me.

I'm okay with that. Professor has always taken care of me; if I want to go out and play or desire something, she will usually heed my request. And the most important thing is that she is gentle toward me. If I am not satisfied with this, then I'm really just too hard to please.

Sometimes — just sometimes — there is a small pain in my chest like a prick from a rose thorn, but I'm used to it.

♠

Today after dinner it's time for my weekly maintenance.

"Let's get started~"

Donning a white robe, Professor walks into the research lab. A thick stack of folders is in her hands. Seeing this scene, I show her a dissatisfied expression and turn my head.

It’s because I hate the maintenance process.

“Don’t move.”

Professor immediately takes out a pencil flashlight from her pocket, then flipped the switch with a click, shining the ray of light on my eyes. This process is not to assess death, but just a simple test to determine if my pupils are functioning properly.

After that, Professor takes out a few cards and shuffles them exaggeratedly like a magician, then quickly places them in front of me. I directly answer the pictures that I saw— “Star, cross, apple, square.”

“That’s great.”

My dynamic visual system seems to be functioning well.

Then, Professor says like a nanny taking care of a child: “Alright, ahh~.” Suddenly, I feel rather embarrassed. Professor pries my mouth open with her fingers that are wearing gloves, carefully examining the condition of my mouth. I cannot keep from emitting strange huffing sounds.

Professor rapidly writes down the results on a paper form beside her. It’s an official document that will go to a government office after this. The law states that a normal family robot has to have regular check-ups twice a year.

For me, it’s every week. Probably because I’m a new model robot, I have to undergo various check ups.

“Next is the skin exam.”

—it’s here! The skin exam!

As its name suggests, this is an examination of the surface of my skin. Which means—

I must take off my clothes.

“First, your face.”

Professor holds my face with both of her hands, pulling me closer to her.

—Uwaa!

Professor stares at my face like she is going to burn a hole on it. Her dark amber irises come closer to me.

“Hmm……” Professor observes me with a serious gaze as if she is thinking about licking my face. I’m frozen, but my heart pounds frantically. If I move even a bit, our faces would touch.

“The skin on your face is okay.” Professor jots down the results. Then, she says as if nothing happened: “Then take off your clothes.”

“Ye- Yes ma’am……”

I nervously take off my socks and place them into the clothing basket. Then, I take off my maid headdress, apron and dress, leaving only my bra and shorts on. I don’t feel cold at all. In fact, my body feels burning hot.

The reason Professor asked me to take off my clothes is not because of some lewd interest. The skin exam is a check up to determine if there are any scratches or changes on my artificial skin. Face, neck, shoulders, arms, belly and back, Professor checks them all with a serious gaze.

— Ahh….. huu.

My artificial skin can sense Professor’s breath, so I have goosebumps on my back. Though I have gone through this examination every week for three years, I still haven’t gotten used to it.

“Alright, take off your bra.”

“Uuu……”

“What is it?”

I mentally brace myself, saying “No…… Nevermind” while extending my hand to my back. If I didn’t cooperate, it would just extend the time the exam takes.

I take off my light blue bra, showing my white breasts. Not too big or small, Professor said that the soft shape perfectly suits a young girl of this age. I was modelled on Professor’s sister, so her breasts were probably like this too.

Professor takes off her glasses and looks carefully. I am so embarrassed that I can almost breathe fire.

“Okay, take off your panties too.”

Professor jots down the results on the paper and coolly gives me my next instruction.

— Uuuuu.

I place my fingers on my panties and unwillingly take them off. I’m so embarrassed that I feel I might faint.

After taking off my panties, I am totally nude.

“Let’s see……”

Professor immediately squats down in front of me. Then, she closely examines my ‘front’ and ‘back.’ I can feel Professor’s breath, and her forehead lightly touches my lower abdomen. If other people see this scene, they would definitely get the wrong impression.

“Hmm…… This is……”

Professor’s cool voice suddenly becomes rough. She seems to have found ‘that.’

“The spots again?”

I ask her, while Professor says while checking: “Yes. There’s one at the right side of your butt.” Then, she uses her finger to touch the position of the spot. My body swayed lightly.

“It has a diameter of five centimetres, and is light purple……”

Professor writes down the characteristics of the spot on the paper. For some reason, my body would sometimes be mottled with small spots. Their position varies. Sometimes they even appear on my face. I was shocked at the start, but I’m used to it now.

“Can it be fixed?”

“Of course.”

Professor takes out a machine that is even thinner than the pen-shaped flashlight and presses it onto my bottom. This method is called the optical segregation cleaning method, or just ‘clearing stains’ on my artificial skin.

“There.”

Professor slaps my bottom with a thwack. I lightly touch it, then quickly put on my panties and my bra. It's lucky that the spot today is small. If the spot is too big, I would have to continue to stand here nude.

"Let's have a short break."

After saying that, Professor leaves the research lab. As smoking is prohibited here, she is going to smoke her cirgarette in the corridor.

The examination is finally over. I relax and heave a sigh.

For the sake of Professor's reputation I should explain a bit— Professor is examining me personally and not taking me to a specialist because I would otherwise have to go to specialized agencies for maintenance if I refused her exam. I would have to show my nude body to the male technicians. Even the thought is scary…

So, Professor got a robot technician certification and shoulders the responsibility of my maintenance. It also eliminates the fussy procedures of going to the various governmental departments. I can be examined at home like this only because Professor's cares for me.

—I understand that, but……

Professor sits back onto the chair after five minutes, saying "Well," and crosses her arm. There are still many examination documents, and I have to undergo a scan of my mental circuits, action control verification and the examination of my safety circuits.

Feeling depressed, I stare at Professor grudgingly like a child looking at a doctor holding a hypodermic needle.

After noticing my gaze, Professor says in the strange tone of a spoiled girl "Ara, Miss Iris, do you have something to say?" Her mouth seems to indicate faint amusement.

"Nothing!"

I unhappily turn my face away.

Five Days Before

On the day after maintenance.

I continue to sweep the floor and wash the clothes as usual, but I have a lot of free time after noon. Well, it's the fault of my personality because I just feel uncomfortable if I don't get the housework done quickly.

— Then.

The approximate time for Professor's return is twelve minutes after four.

"Hmm, remote, remote……."

I shout "Found it," lie down after picking up the remote from the table, and turn on the television. It would be much more convenient had I hidden a remote inside my body, but it's a pity that I don't have that function. Professor once said, "If I installed such a silly thing, doing maintenance would be much more troublesome."

The large screen is showing today's news. Political scandals, the situation of the army in the north, and a murder case somewhere. I blankly stare at the nimbly moving mouth of the female presenter.

— Mnn, it's so boring.

I retain my current position and press the buttons on the remote, which makes clicking noises. The pictures on the screen change periodically, but there aren't any of the cooking shows or game shows that I like.

I reluctantly change it back to the news, and 'that' suddenly appears before me.

"About one this afternoon, a robot suddenly went on a rampage at Oval Station in the Venus Fountain Plaza."

Venus Fountain Plaza is the place where the goddess statue that looks extremely alike to Professor is.

The news broadcast reported that a large robot that worked in a second hand parts shop nearby had shouted and then suddenly went on a rampage. The robot hit and smashed the

wall of the shop, then shifted to the fountain plaza. After receiving a call, the police responded to the location to deal with the problem.

“Here’s a recording of the incident.”

After the presenter finishes talking, the picture cuts to a different scene.

It’s probably the recording taken from a surveillance camera. On the screen, a gray cylindrical robot comes over and waves his arms around. He repeatedly hits the walls of the shop, looking like a young, energetic person in the movies with young, passionate actors, and seems quite human. A few clear scratches like lightning bolts can be seen on his broad back.

Finally, the robot shakily walks to the plaza.

— Ahhh, that won’t do.

I pray in my heart.

— You can’t go there.

But my wishes aren’t transmitted to him. The robot steps into the crowded plaza. As expected, his actions create a huge disturbance as the elderly people who were talking, the noisy kids, and the cuddling couples scattered.

The robot stood alone after the people had left. Only the fountain rhythmically danced behind the robot standing blankly there, forming countless droplets of rainbow-colored water. The deceptively harmonious scene belies the reality of the situation.

And then in an instant-

A few blue spots appear on the body of the robot like perched fireflies. The robot lowers his head slowly to look at the spots, then a beam of laser suddenly pierces the air. The laser beam penetrates the heavy, metal skin of the robot and gouts of steam erupt as violently as lava when it touches the fountain.

It was a police laser rifle.

A second shot. The laser emits a deep sound. The beam slices through the air and cuts off the right arm of the robot from the shoulder. It falls to the ground with a ‘clunk.’ The robot bends down to pick up his right arm, and the third shot hits him squarely. His

outstretched left hand is englobed by blue radiance like a ball of glass on a glassblower's wand emitting cruel sparks.

Not long after that, the fourth shot robs the robot of his right leg, causing him to lose balance, then the fifth, sixth and seventh shot hit him—

— Ahhhh, stop it, I don't want to watch anymore!

One could say that he was simply annihilated. Around thirty seconds after the first shot, the sundered face was the largest remaining part of the robot's body.

The robot now silent, five people wearing a metal helmet like a fish bowl rush to the scene. They are the special police unit fully equipped with silver armor and are called the Waste Clearing Troop. They were wielding the laser rifles with a sharp, sphere shaped magazine, about a meter long— this is the special gun used by the unit against robots.

When they begin to collect the scattered robot parts, one of them picks up the 'head' of the robot and raises it into the air like a war spoil. Black machine oil flows out of the head like blood, spattering the ground with oily spots.

I'm repulsed by the sight. I feel my gorge rising in the back of my throat.

After the recording stops, the face of the presenter appears again on the screen. She said this was the third robot crime in Oval City this month.

Robot crime. That's what they call it when a robot commits a crime.

There are two categories of robot crime: The first is a crime caused by the human using a robot, the second is a crime caused by the robot going on a rampage himself. How does one determine whether a robot went on a rampage because of technical failures or because of his owner's orders? The officials and the 'judiciary dissection unit' can't.

Robot rampage incidents occur less than one percent as often as do car accidents, but the news always exaggerates it. Because of public pressure, the robot manufacturers might have to recall their products. The process of handling the matter is actually similar to other consumer products, but because a robot costs about as much as a luxury car, it is a heavy blow to the manufacturers. Cases of manufacturers going bankrupt because of having to recall their products too often aren't uncommon.

— I shouldn't watch this.

I turn off the television and lie down on the mat in a '大'shape, closing my eyes.

When robots want to calm down, they close their eyes. Temporarily shutting down the visual senses has the effect of resting the stimuli processing function of the mental circuits.

I hadn't noticed that it's raining outside. I can hear only the constant sound of the rain in the room.

The video of a wretched robot starts to surface behind my eyelids. The parts of the robot would appear on the second hand parts market, or would be completely melted into scrap metal. After all, he suddenly went on a rampage, destroying public facilities and the peace. One really couldn't expect anything else but to become scrap metal.

— But.

A question remains in my heart.

Why did he suddenly go on a rampage?

Four Days Before

Sunday.

I am wearing a white dress with frills on it, checking my attire in front of the mirror.

I'm going on a date with Professor today. Well, just for a half-day date to a movie and lunch.

"Iris, we're going soon~"

Came Professor's voice from downstairs.

"Alright, I'm coming!"

I respond in a loud voice, putting on a large straw hat at the same time. The hat hides the antenna above my ears, so that there won't be curious kids shouting "Robot! It's a robot!"

— Attire okay, hat alright, battery level full!

I hurry down the stairs after completing my last minute check.

Professor is standing at the front door, wearing her personal clothes.

— So stunning!

The blue shirt and green jeans are actually rather casual clothing, but since she's quite tall, this shows off her exceptional figure. If there were a white horse beside her she would look just like a prince— but this analogy seems a little strange.

A silver cigarette case gleams in front of her chest. Having Professor's favorite oblong cigarette case hung on a chain, it seems just like a necklace. The 8-shaped circlet cigarettes are kept in the case.

"Professor, how do I look?"

I twirl in a circle like a ballerina. The dress and the straw hat flutter gently in the breeze.

Professor narrows her eyes, as if dazzled by the sun and says "Mnn, it suits you."

It suits you…… It suits you…… It suits you…… It suits you……. Professor's words reverberate repeatedly in my mental circuits.

Ahh, just hearing that could make me happy all day.

"Let's go then."

Professor walks over while lifting her long hair. I hold her hand while standing beside her.

As the door is opened, the blue sky that makes one want to burst into song seems to be blessing us.

There are a lot of people at the cinema beside the station.

I show my robot certificate at the ticket booth, then the employees start to size me up. My antenna above my ear is hidden, so they are suspicious of me because they can't tell if I'm a human or a robot.

It seems that the elevator is offline today; we pass by quite a few technicians at the entrance of the cinema. More than half of them seem to be labor robots, probably the HRL004 model from their appearance. Whichever it is, they're an old model.

Labor robots have been around even longer than family robots have. As more of them are sold in the market, they are more often seen on the streets. Waiters at a restaurant, night time security guards, attendants at the entrance hall of a company, carpenters — their uses are quite diverse.

Old family robots are also often sold in the second hand market and reused as labor robots. Young female robots usually enter the labor robot market this way. Recently, the people who combine second hand parts of robots to create a new robot to sell are increasing, and the hidden dangers of this have been noted as a problem to society. It is, by the way, against the law for unqualified persons to assemble a robot, similar to the fact that one can't just assemble a car and drive it on the road.

After entering the cinema, Professor and I choose a seat towards the back of the room. We place the fruit juice and popcorn on the small table between the seats. After five minutes, the movie starts playing.

"Hey, Professor."

"What is it?"

"Why are we watching a horror movie today?"

Two young women watching a horror movie alone seems strange. The other people in the seats are all man-woman couples.

"Analyzing the actions of the zombies could be used as a reference for the theory of movement control for robots."

"Huh…… Theory of movement control……"

Professor is always passionate about her research. I can't help an admiring thought: "As expected of Professor," while a hint of mirth suddenly appears on the corner of Professor's mouth.

“Eh, why are you smiling?”

“Nothing, Iris is really a good and honest girl.”

“Eh?”

I don’t know why Professor praised me, but it pleases me anyway.

“That’s right, Professor. According to my investigations, the movie ‘This is a Fateful Encounter’ is the most popular movie, a touching masterpiece…… It’s rare that we come here, so do you want to watch that?”

“I say, isn’t that a romantic movie?”

“That would be fine, romantic movies.”

“The stereotypical contents are lame.”

“The- then what about a monster movie? Like ‘Monster Showdown: Vanilla vs Chocola’?”

“There’d probably be a lot of kids there. That won’t do. They’d make a lot of noise when the movie is playing.”

“What about ‘Third-rate Demon God Visa Darke’?”

“Isn’t that a series? I didn’t watch its predecessors, so how would I know of its contents?”

“Uuuu…… You know that I’m scared of watching horror movies, right?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I puff out my cheeks and start to have a tantrum. Professor bursts into laughter when she sees me.

All of a sudden, a bell rings and the movie starts.

The long-awaited zombies shamble unsteadily forward from the movie screen.

And so.

“Not bad.”

Professor gives her impression of the movie, satisfied. It seems that she finds the visual effects of the horror movie adequate.

As for me, I have become a pale-faced robot with periodic violent spasms.

“Iris, are you okay?”

“H- h-h- how could I be okay! Wh- wh- wh- what is that, that movie cuts like bzzzt~ and springs up like dong~!”

Instead of saying that this is a horror movie, it’s really more a violent, bloody movie.

Halfway through the movie, I try to hug Professor quite a few times in fear but was pushed away by the expressionless Professor with her right hand.

I try to fling away the squirting blood, flying brains and squirming intestines burnt into my mental circuits by violently shaking my head, but even if I do so, the data obviously remain unchanged.

“Since our coming here is such a rare event, why don’t we take a commemorative photo?”

“Eh~ Here?”

After calling to a worker nearby, Professor passes her camera to him. It seems like she’s going to use the signboard of the horror movie ‘Nightmare~ Rotten Nightmare’ as a background to take our commemorative photo together.

“No, let’s take it some other place.”

“That won’t do. We watched a movie here today, so we must take it here.”

“We’ll be cursed if we take a photo here!”

“That isn’t a scientific reason.”

After grabbing my elbow tightly, Professor hugs my shoulders in front of the signboard.

Our bodies are tightly touching, and it would be a great moment if it were some other time. But right now, I just feel that the army of zombies from the signboard would jump

out at any moment. Especially the zombies that had their lower bodies chopped off, their intestines poking out; I feel my whole body trembling just thinking of it.

“Okay, cheese!”

After shouting that, the worker presses the shutter.

Just like that, I am in a photo, my face deathly pale, squeezing out a smile; Professor, with a devilish smile on her face.

After eating lunch at a nearby restaurant, we take thirty minutes to buy the makings of dinner; then we return home.

On the way back home, Professor and I walk home hand in hand.

And now, Professor is reading the newspaper she bought from a newsstand. One of the contents is ‘Unit Composed of New Robot Model Utterly Annihilating Enemy’s Base.’

“Reading while walking is dangerous, Professor.”

“It’s okay. I’m holding Iris’ hand anyway.”

“Really……”

“It’s because the special report in the ‘Oval Times’ is so interesting that I can’t resist. Crane Cloudy is one of the top researchers of robots in the world.”

Though Professor is still on a date with me, she is fascinated by the newspaper. I’m so jealous of the paper.

While dragging Professor, who’s holding her paper in one hand, we arrive at Venus Plaza.

— There it is.

About fifty meters from the plaza, it’s the shop. Its walls have been broken down, the ground is sunken, and there is also yellow tape on the outside, forbidding people from entering. This is the robot crime scene I saw from the news on the television.

“Hey, Professor.”

“Hmm?”

Professor finally shifts her attention away from the newspaper, raising her head.

“About that……” I point at the shop with the collapsed wall. Professor nods, answering immediately “The place where the robot rampage happened?” It seems that Professor knows of this as well.

“Why did the robot go on a rampage?”

I express my doubts about the matter.

Professor deliberately lowers her voice, answering: “I have an obligation to keep this secret, so I can’t answer you.”

“Eh?” I ask, confused. “An obligation?”

Professor smiles faintly and shrugs while saying: “I was just making fun of you.”

“The robot was sent to our research centre for dissection. And our group is in charge of it.”

I blinked in surprise. I never would have thought that the robot in the news would have any connection to Professor. While thinking about it, the agency that is the most specialized in robotic matters is the ‘First Robotics Laboratory of Oval University’ where Professor works at, so it’s natural that things would turn out this way.

“Then did you learn anything?”

“Mnn, yeah……”

Professor touches her chin lightly with her index finger.

“Put simply, we think it was ‘short circuit of the motor system causing the safety circuits to go haywire.’ Even so, we aren’t that clear about some points, as the robot was excessively damaged.”

Robots have a central group of circuits called the three main systems. They are the logic circuits, the movement control circuits, and the safety circuits.

Compared with a human, the mental circuits would be the brain, the movement control circuits would be the spinal cord and nervous system. The orders given by the mental circuits would be transmitted to the whole body though the movement control circuits, causing the limbs to move.

The safety circuits would be like an emergency brake system that would prevent the two previous systems from going into disorder. All robots must have safety circuits installed; the manufacturers are required to do so by law, so this type of circuit is hidden in my body as well.

“Even so, I still have something that I’m worried about.”

Professor continues to say. Taking out a cirgarette from her cigarette case, she places it into her mouth. The cirgarette immediately gives out purple smoke.

“After recovering the data of the mental circuits, I noticed something odd. Robots seem to be able to have ‘illusions’.”

“Illusions……. Huh?”

Professor nods. A sweet sour smell drifts over from the circlet cigarette.

“It seems that he was chasing ‘someone’ that only he could see. If you explain it like this, you might be able to explain the actions of the robot in a logical way. The robot breaking the door is because ‘that person’ was at the other side of the wall, walking to the fountain is also because ‘that person’ went there.”

Robots having hallucinations. Can this happen?

“I received reports of the visual and color settings of robots going haywire before, but the case this time is quite unusual…… Additionally, the other members of our group did not notice this before I suggested the possibility. Really……”

Professor’s eyes are as lively as the summer sun, and her voice is quite agitated too. Any time she talks about something concerning robots, Professor becomes extremely active. I like seeing Professor like this.

Even so, as our topic today is robot crime, my feelings just now are rather complicated.

“Oh…..?”

At this moment, Professor suddenly stops.

“What is it?”

“Iris, wait for me for a moment.”

After that, Professor walks to the other side of the road.

She is walking towards a robot lying on the ground. His right leg has been broken through, his body is broken down, curling up his body like a kitten, lying in front of a closed down store.

Professor ignored the fact that it would dirty her clothes and starts to carry the robot’s upper torso, leaning him on the steel door of the store. Then, she starts to do a whole body examination on the robot with a serious expression on her face.

“Hmm, the 007 model huh……” mutters Professor.

Professor then slowly takes out a spare battery from her pocket and stuffs it into the chest of the robot. After a few seconds, a ‘beep’ is heard, then the chest of the robot quivers violently for a while like an electric shock was used on him after his heartbeat stopped.

“Very good, his circuits are still functioning.”

After taking out the battery, Professor immediately takes out her phone to make a phone call.

“…… Ah, Ralph? It’s me. I’m near the fountain plaza right now.”

Professor briefly tells the person at the other side of the phone about the model and condition of the robot. The conversation ends after 30 seconds, then Professor starts looking at the cover of the gutters rolled aside nearby.

“This kid…… actually passed through such a dark, narrow place……”

As Professor said, the robot seemed to have crawled out from the storm sewer, his body stained with moss. After imagining the silhouette of a robot crawling through a sewer pipe like a dark, narrow passage, an inexplicable feeling wells up in me.

Professor sticks a sticker with ‘Oval University First Robotics Laboratory: Final Reclamation Information’ onto the chest of the robot, then says to me after turning around “Sorry for the wait.”

“Professor, you called the research centre just now?”

“Yeah. I made some arrangements for collecting this kid.”

I turn my head around to look at the robot just now.

“You can fix him?”

“Yeah, I won’t know if I don’t try.”

Professor often fixes robots that are lying on the roadside. If she got to know the identity of the robot, she would contact the registered owner. Though there were some lucky robots who were taken away by their owners, most of them were kept in the storage room of the research centre.

If the robots are claimed by the Robot Management Department first, the robots would be converted into scrap metal after dealing with the necessary procedures. From this perspective, the robots found by Professor are actually very lucky.

Walking forward hand in hand, I ask.

“Hey, Professor.”

“What is it?”

“Why do you keep helping and fixing the robots?”

“Hmm, yeah……”

Professor thinks for a moment, then stares at me.

“Because…maybe…it’s the meaning of my existence?”

I feel that the smile that Professor gave me was gentle but contained a hint of sadness.

An expression like this sometimes appeared on Professor’s face.

After dinner that day, Professor starts a long awaited ‘special talk’ for me. This is because Professor finished her work earlier than expected. I get this special talk and a date, too; what a special day this day is.

I move the table and chair into the research lab while beaming, arranging the small blackboard and duster, then I prepare some snacks and tea. Then the preparations are complete.

A special talk.

This is a private talk that Professor organizes for me time after time.

Professor organizes a lecture at Oval University each week. As she’s a young genius who’s at the forefront of robot engineering, the classroom is always stuffed full of people, and quite a lot of people from other universities go to listen, too.

Professor’s lectures are very special and would start talks with philosophical topics like ‘Robots and Ethics,’ ‘Robots and Love’ and so on. Learning about these lectures a long time ago, I shouted “I want to join too!,” but in the end, I couldn’t go. I want to see with my own eyes, Professor standing on the stage with her white robe and holding a cane, teaching with a heroic posture and cold tone. As robots don’t have the right to go to school, attending sneakily would just affect Professor’s stand. As I was about to give up, Professor gave me a suggestion:

“Why don’t we just have the lecture at home?”

From that time on, Wendy von Umbrella started to organize special lectures for Iris Rain Umbrella alone.

I take out my thick notebook from my beloved folder. The notebook was jotted full of questions that I asked during the previous lectures.

For example,

“Do robots undergo psychological growth?”

“Do robots undergo puberty and rebellious stages?”

“What are the differences between the emotions of robots and humans?”

“Can robots go to heaven too?”

“Might there be a day when humans marry robots?”

“How much does Professor love me?”

Though it was mixed with a few personal questions, these are still in a tolerable area. This is a personal talk, after all.

“Alright, please get back to your seat.”

Professor walks into the lab. Today, she is still wearing a white robe on top of her suit, her beautiful hair tied up behind her. On the other hand, I’m still wearing my usual maid outfit, so our combination is rather strange.

Professor place her hands on the old wooden lectern that she brought from the university, saying: “Starting roll call.”

“Iris Rain Umbrella.”

“Here! Here, here, here!”

I poke out my body from the table, raising my hand energetically like a kid who just started school.”

“Miss Iris.”

“What is it!”

“Saying ‘here’ once would be enough.”

“Understood!”

I am extremely happy at this moment. It would be nice if robots could go to school one day.

Professor coughs for a moment, then started the lecture with a ‘Well, please turn to page fifty two.’

I open the textbook that Professor uses in the university. As I read it quite a lot of times already, the book is quite tattered.

“The theme of the lecture today is ‘What is the meaning of the existence of a robot.’ Recently, this type of research is categorized as robot psychology. A thesis that I spoke of about eight years ago initiated a hot discussion……”

Professor says that rapidly. The blackboard is gradually covered with Professor’s beautiful writing.

I am recording Professor’s words onto the notebook. Of course, saving the contents on the blackboard in my mental circuit can be done, but it wouldn’t have the feel of a lecture if so. The most important thing is the atmosphere and our attitudes.

After thirty minutes.

“…… Hmm, the above is the history of the ‘meaning of life’ and ‘mental hygiene’ from older models to newer models of robots. Though the arrangement is rather ugly from an academic view, but it might be able to help out students who are looking for a reference. …… Any questions?”

“Here!”

I raise my right hand and wave it with all my might. But there’s only one student here anyways.

“Miss Iris.”

“Your lecture is very interesting, thank you for that!”

The first thing is to be courteous.

“Then, about the ‘meaning of existence’ that professor mentioned just now, does it include ‘robots must serve their masters’?”

“Of course. Learning robots are prevalent among family robots; the direct meaning of their existence is to serve the robot user.”

“Then the meaning of my existence is to serve Professor, that’s for sure.”

“How did you get to that conclusion?”

“Because I love Professor.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Saying ‘okay’ once would be enough; Professor said that.”

“You are really so fussy.”

Professor heaves a sigh.

While jotting down the tables and explanations on the blackboard, I ponder today’s theme – the meaning of our existence. Lastly, after I hand in a simple report of my thoughts, the lecture would end.

“Alright, I’m done!”

“Wow, you’re quick.”

Like a detective who solved a hard case, I slap the report onto the lectern.

“Impression Report (Eighteenth time)” Theme……. Robots and Meaning of Existence.

The meaning of my existence is Professor. My beloved Professor. I love you, Professor. Marry me, Professor. End!

After reading my report, Professor’s expression becomes as awkward as an old police who had the limelight stolen by a detective.

“Erm, Miss Iris.”

“What is it!”

“Your report has only one row.”

“That row has everything!”

“How unmotivated are you.”

“I’m full of motivation!”

“Are you looking down on me?”

“I cannot deny the possibility!”

After heaving a sigh, Professor fishes out a circlet cigarette from her cigarette case.

She breaks the 8-shaped circlet cigarette into half, then pops one into her mouth.

“Professor, cigarettes……”

“It’s okay. This isn’t the university anyways.”

“No, not that…… No smoking in the lab.”

“Ah.”

As if she is throwing a tantrum, she declares while pouting: “Then that’s the end of the lecture today!”

She takes off her white robe, throws it onto the table, and leaves the classroom speedily with purple smoke behind her. “Really.” The word faintly drifted over along with the smoke.

I pick up the report that I wrote. A large red word is written at the center— “REDO”

The prank today might be a little bit too much. As the special lectures are the only rare times when I can make fun of Professor, I couldn’t resist it.

I should send her some red tea and cake after this to improve her mood.

Three Days Before

This morning is different from the others.

Today dawned with a gloomy, discontinuous rain. It is as if the sky is crying because it is going to part with the sun; the lonely rain makes people depressed as well.

I awaken Professor and prepare her breakfast after that. But today, for some reason, I accidentally charred part of the egg, I wonder why.

On this unusual morning, Professor said some unusual things as well.

“Iris, erm……”

While walking out of the arc entrance, Professor looks back at me from the place where the courtyard connects to the streets outside.

“What is it, Professor?”

“After I come home today, I have something important to tell you.”

“Something…… important?”

Professor nods while holding her umbrella.

Her expression looks very calm, but also lonely at the same time.

I ask “What is the matter?” and raise the umbrella slightly higher, looking at Professor’s face.

“I’ll tell you after I come home. Yeah, after dinner.”

“I really don’t like it when you act mysterious like this!”

“Heh heh heh. Mnn, it isn’t anything bad. How should I put it…… Ah, you could say that it’s a present?”

I cry out loud “That’s great!” and raise the umbrella even higher.

“Wha- what are you giving me!? I want a marriage application with Professor!”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Ah, but, marriage application huh……. It does have the meaning of ‘eternal happiness’.”

“Huh? Eternal!? Wha- what is with this!?”

“I’ll tell you when I get back. Be a good girl ‘til then”

“Understood! Professor’s Iris will be a very very good girl today too!”

“Then I’m off.”

Professor starts to walk.

“Take care on the road! Come home earlier!”

Without turning her head back, Professor waves her right hand lightly.

The blue umbrella is just like a lightly painted water color drawing, losing its focus in the raindrops and becoming foggy. Professor vanishes just like that after going around the corner.

The rain starts to get heavier. I run back to the doorstep. For some reason, I suddenly have a feeling of someone pulling my hair, so I turn around to have a look before entering the house.

There isn’t anyone at the arc door.

♠

This afternoon, I complete the housework and my task of recharging myself. After that, I start to study hard on the sofa.

This book is called ‘New: Basic Theory of Robot Engineering’, and I borrowed this from Professor’s collection of books. Professor is a young beauty with an exceptional figure, but her bookshelves are full of academic books, without even a trace of books related to fashion.

By the way, I’m reading the chapter ‘Emotions and Expression of Robots’ in the book.

The theme of the chapter tells of how the ‘emotions’ borne from the mental circuit of a robot would affect the ‘expression’ that is expressed by the artificial skin on their faces.

Humans usually laugh when they're happy and cry when they're sad.

However, it is different with robots. If a special mental circuit is not built in, robots would not have 'emotions;' if their artificial skins and muscles are not modified by a technician with considerable skill, the robots would not be able to convey their 'expressions' either.

In addition, human expressions are very complicated. Just the action of 'laughing,' there's the heh heh laugh, the ho ho laugh, a gentle smile, a sweet smile, a silly laugh and so on, and there are a lot of differences between the expressions. Human expressions can be categorized into about a few hundred; only by making subtle changes to the mental circuit, robots can convey expressions that are lifelike. Hence, the facial expression and language recognition software are the best and the most expensive ones in the robot market. The price of expression software would sometimes be even higher than the price of the robot itself.

I have the latest version of the expression software installed on me. I am thankful to Professor for letting me laugh and cry, fly into a temper, throw a tantrum and so on.

I close the book that I was reading. It is now five forty five in the evening.

Professor will be back soon. I should prepare dinner now.

However.

Over an hour passed, and it is now seven thirteen at night.

— Professor is so slow……

Professor isn't back yet. She's late for about one hour, thirteen minutes and twenty one seconds. The pot in the kitchen is filled with today's dinner— Laulyl styled butter stew, and it'll just need a slight heating up.

— it's so strange.

Professor would contact me every time she comes home. Even so, I haven't received any messages from her today.

I feel like calling Professor's phone, but she reminded me before not to call her when she's at work.

I impatiently stared at the hands of the clock on the wall.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Professor isn't back yet.

Tick-tock, Tick-tock.

I finished all the housework.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

Not back yet, not back yet?

The second hand turned in a circle, two circles, three circles—

At the instant when the seventh circle arrives.

Trriiiiiing, triiiiiing…… The phone in the corridor starts to ring.

— it's Professor!

I run to the corridor like a spring, jumping onto the receiver of the phone.

"Hello, sorry for the wait! This is the Umbrella residence!"

I wait for the answer of the opposing party with a pounding heart.

"Sorry for calling so late. This is the First Robotics Laboratory of Oval University."

A male voice is coming from the other side of the phone. The First Robotics Laboratory would be where Professor works.

Learning that he isn't Professor, I couldn't help but feel disappointed, but I still answer calmly.

"I am Wendy von Umbrella's robot. My master is not here at the moment, so please leave a message if you wish to contact her."

I answer in the tone of a machine.

After a moment's silence, the man says in a low voice: "I am Professor Umbrella's assistant, Ralph Ciel."

The sensitivity of my auditory function increased sharply.

“Is that so. Thanks for taking care of my master all this time.”

“…… about Professor Umbrella.”

“Yes.”

— it’s strange.

Goosebumps appear on my skin at that moment.

Why has this person called here specially?

If he wanted to look for Professor, he could just call her own phone.

Uneasiness and fear crawl on my back like bugs.

“E- erm!” Therefore, I can’t help but ask, “Did something happen to Professor!?”

He hesitated for a moment, then says in a determined voice.

The sharp weapon of truth pierces into my ears.

“Professor Umbrella has died in an accident.”

—?

What.

Happened—

What?

Think,

World,

Everything is—

“— hello, hello hello!?”

The sound of someone talking is coming from the receiver.

— guest.

I wonder how much time passed.

— a guest.

The electronic voice called me again and again.

— there's a guest at the door.

That moment, I finally came to my senses.

"…… Ah?"

There is something touching my leg.

I look down, only to see the swaying receiver knocking lightly on my leg.

— ahhh.

My fingers start to move.

—that's right.

—Professor…….

The lost memories surface from the depths of my consciousness.

—because of an accident……

—there was a phone call.

A terrible phone call.

—died.

—there's a guest. Please greet them immediately.

Because of the electronic voice urging me, I start to walk.

Almost like I am running away from here, I walk step by step down the stairs, opening the door.

Reached the outside.

♠

Outside, it already sank into the total darkness of night time.

I walk to the arch door, seeing a black car parked on the road in front of the door.

Outside the driver's seat, a man wearing a suit and a pained expression on his face is standing there. The man is still young, but his face is a sickly white, and his cheeks are sunken like an old man.

I call to him, then he leaves the body of the car that he was leaning against just now in surprise, proclaiming that he is the assistant, Ralph Ciel.

He's the person who gave me the terrible phone call.

"You're Miss Iris Rain Umbrella…… huh?"

Ralph says in a low voice. I nod silently.

After that, the door of the car opens silently. Because of Ralph's urgings, I sit down on the seat beside the driver's seat.

I did not ask where we are going.

♠

While sitting in the car, I look out the windows with unfocused eyes. The neon lights in the Commercial Street are casting thin rays of lights like fallen meteorites, falling away from me gradually.

Ralph says nothing. If you say that he's not talking because he's worried about me, it's more like he doesn't have the energy to speak. The more pressing problem is that the only common topic between us is Professor, but if we were to speak of her, we could not avoid coming up against the terrible news again.

After about ten minutes, the car reaches the hospital. I step down from the car, staring at the white building greeting us in the night skies.

Ralph brought me to the basement entrance of the hospital. We underwent quite a few security checks on our way, in the hall and the elevator, and our IDs and other items

were inspected. After knowing that I'm Professor's robot, some people stared at me with a curious expression.

The room is at the end of a corridor at B4 level.

Pushing open the door that has a sign of 'cold storage' on it, I can see a round capsule-like box that is about two meters long at the center of the room. According to Ralph, Professor's body is kept in the white box.

Before opening the box, Ralph explains the 'incident' simply.

This morning, Professor was in the seventh dissection analysis lab on twelfth floor, performing a 'judicial dissection.' Quite a lot of rampage incidents like this have happened recently, and these robots are repeatedly sent to the lab. At this time, I recall the robot that went on a rampage at the Venus Fountain Plaza.

"The incident happened about thirty minutes after dissection started."

Ralph licks his dry lips and continues.

After the robot was brought to the dissection analysis room, Professor and Ralph's group started to dissect him.

The dissection proceeded well for half an hour, and at that moment that the accident occurred. The robot suddenly rebooted, stood up and started to go on a rampage. Though his battery level was rather low, he still rebooted for unknown reasons. Before they managed to use the emergency laser gun, the robot broke down the massive walls of the dissection analysis room with a power unimaginable to humans in normal conditions.

"Professor Umbrella was the nearest person at that moment. …… Since all of that happened all of a sudden, Professor didn't have the time to run away, so the robot—"

Professor's abdomen was pierced through.

Professor is dead.

After that, the robot was overwhelmed with laser gun.

And here we are.

The white lid of the capsule opens like a flower blooming, then her body appears before me.

“Pro- fessor……”

I stagger towards Professor, who is lying inside, like a sleepwalker.

Professor’s face has lost its usual color, but looks very peaceful, as if she is sleeping. Even so, a stain of blood can still be seen at the corner of her mouth. The red blood stuck to her chest and her belly looks very strange in stark contrast with her white face, so I cannot help but stare for some time. As though she is a red rose sealed in white ice, Professor radiates a certain frozen beauty.

I extend my hand to Professor, touching her white face.

So cold.

Professor’s body is so cold that I suspect my temperature sensing function has malfunctioned. Her body temperature is much lower than that of a living person.

I start to plead soundlessly.

Professor. It’s me, your Iris.

Professor. Is it painful? You lost so much blood, so it’s probably painful.

Professor. Why did you do such dangerous thing? Why didn’t you just let the others handle the robot in a rampage?

Professor. Professor, who helped robots all this time, why must you be killed by a robot? This just doesn’t make sense.

Professor. I’m here. Your Iris is here.

So Professor. Please open your eyes. Give me an order. Tease me. Touch my hair—

Just at this moment.

‘That’ gave out a dim light at the corner of my vision. After looking closely, I spy a familiar silver cigarette box on the small table that has the capsule containing Professor’s body. Professor loves this locked up box that is like a necklace.

I stretch out my hand to it. My fingers are still trembling comically.

The cigarette case in my palm is stained with blood, and only a circlet cigarette can be seen after opening the oval lid.

“Ahhh……”

And I noticed at that moment.

A tiny photo is stuck to the inside of the lid. The photo’s background is a movie signboard, and there’s a young girl with a forced smile and a woman smiling devilishly placing her hand on the girl’s shoulders.

This is the group photo that Professor and I took before this.

“When Professor Umbrella died, she was still clutching that cigarette case.”

Ralph says in a low voice.

Two Days Before

It was the first day since Professor had passed away.

I spent my time idly in the mansion. I had been sitting quietly all night, staring at the scenery outside the window of the living room. The sky was ironically blue, and the birds were chirping. They almost seemed to be singing a hymn of peace. But I felt I was the only person left in the world. I wasn’t sad, It was more that I was unable to fully embrace the truth.

Not knowing what to do, I eventually returned to my usual routine work.

My chores.

I gave the mansion a good cleaning, cut the grass, and paid the bills.

When I was trying to wash Professor's clothes, I found my hands shaking. After preparing the meals, I was in shock, realizing that no one would finish my dishes.

The bed in Professor's bedroom was cold. When the thought that the bed would never be warm again came up onto my mind, I felt a tearing in my chest.

I did not even know what I was doing. But I continued with the chores. That was how I kept escaping from the truth. It was simply too scary for me to face the reality.

By night time, I eventually had nothing else left to do.

I sat in the hall outside the bedroom, hugging my knees. I felt like if I waited long enough Professor might return. That was why I was firmly grasping her cigarette case and waiting for her all night long.

But Professor did not return.

—WARNING—

At dawn, there was an electronic voice from my mind circuit.

—BATTERY EXHAUSTION IN 5 MINUTES—

A voice with no intonation, spoken in a businesslike tone.

—PLEASE BEGIN CHARGING BATTERY IMMEDIATELY—

I stood up unsteadily and stumbled towards the laboratory.

On my way, I fell down the stairs because I was running out of power. My right foot twisted towards a weird direction. Dragging one of my legs, I walked slowly towards the laboratory.

Sitting on the milk-white bed, I opened my wrist. The linking unit for recharging appeared.

It was at that time that I had a sudden impulse to cut my wrist.

If I cut my wrist, I would die. I would have an easy way out. I would be able to go to where Doctor had gone to.

As my mental state had been a mess ever since Professor had died, I quickly proceeded to realize my desire.

Holding a repair torch, I pressed the switch. A shimmer of hot air shot out of its mouth. Shortly after, a red pillar of flame appeared. Slowly, I moved the burner towards my wrist. Metallic droplets like sweat showed up and the linking unit slowly melted. In ten seconds, the electrical outlet was totally burnt. A huge volume of black machine oil burst out of it.

It was a miserable scene. The outburst of oil from my wrist reached even the ceiling. The laboratory which had been as white as a snowfield turned into a dark room filled with stinky oil. Staring at the scene in a state of ecstasy, the electronic voice of "WARNING! WARNING! WARNING! WARNING!"inside my mind circuit screamed hysterically.

It took five minutes for all the machine oil to flow out of my body. There was just a dark liquid kept shooting out of my wrist. It was almost like the water fountain in the square outside the train station.

And then,

I had a violent shivering fit.

I had never felt anything like it before. Dizziness, nausea, and an intense pain like my cranium being twisted and scratched, hit me quickly again and again. Like a human who drank poison, my lips were trembling. Feeling extremely sick, I rolled on the floor in pain and clutched my chest.

—WARNING! 30 SECONDS BEFORE BATTERY EXHAUSTED! PLEASE START MAINTENANCE PROCEDURES IMMEDIATELY—-

In its usual, businesslike tone, the electronic voice declared my coming death.

Suddenly, like a lunatic, my eyes opened wide.

— No! I don’t want to die!—

I stood up in a panic and grabbed the recharging cable violently. Repeatedly I tried to plug into the electrical outlet of my wrist with the cable. However the charging unit had been deformed from heat. Like trying to thread a needle, all my attempts to link the cable with the unit failed.

—BATTERY EXHAUSTED IN 10 SECONDS, 9, 8, 7…—

Panting in fear, I continued to stab the linking unit in my wrist with the cable. Stab. Stab. Stab. Stab. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.

With a crisp sound of the cable being plunged into the linking unit, electricity and machine oil began to be pumped into my body. The warning sound stopped, and I was relieved from the shivering fit and the nauseous feeling.

I was relieved, from the bottom of my heart.

Ah… now I don't have to die.

Great.

—Great?

I was shocked at my thought.

Is it good that I didn't die?

…when Professor has already passed away?

Is living alone such a happy thing?

Is shamelessly clinging to life and living in dishonour such a happy thing?

The other self inside my body kept whispering.

Iris Rain Umbrella. Why are you still alive? You are a robot after all. Why are you afraid of death? With the master served by you being gone for good, there is no longer any meaning to your existence. Despite this why are you still clinging to life? Die! Die! Die quickly now!

Extremely disgusted with myself, I scratched my head fiercely and tried to pluck my hair.

Undoubtedly, I was obsessed with living. I wanted to live. I did not want to die. That was what I felt, what I realized, after my first time facing death.

I despised myself. Despite loving Professor so much, despite day-by-day shamelessly telling her how much I loved her, I could not even bring myself to follow her.

Whenever I plucked at my hair, the cable clinging from my wrist hit the floor. It was extremely troublesome, but I did not have the courage to pull it away.

The walls and ceiling were black and stunk. Sitting in the black blood that had burst from my body, I kept plucking at my hair like a lunatic. Dozens and dozens of hairs plucked from my head fell onto the ground.

One Day Before

In the afternoon, a guest arrived.

An unfamiliar man in a gray uniform appeared in front of the door with three large, rough robots. They declared that they are from Robots Management Oval Branch, saying that they're here to reclaim me. Seeing that I stink of machine oil, the man frowns.

I am Professor's property, but Professor doesn't have any relatives, so nobody can inherit me. Thus, I have become a 'res nullius' in law, and am categorized as national property. They are claiming me as representatives of the nation— that was how he explained it.

I was clamped between two robots and dragged to the sturdy rack of the escort car. I cannot resist, because there isn't an ounce of energy in me.

After reaching the office of the Robot Management Department, the man hands a stack of thick folders to me, ordering me to go to a specific destination. With the guidance of the steel robots, I am brought to a place.

It is the maintenance factory for robots.

Before robots can be released to the market as products, they must satisfy the safety standards required by law, so they're inspected here. The robots that pass inspection will be bought at auction by private parties.

After my initial construction, it was Professor who did the maintenance and inspection for me, so this is the first time I've ever seen the maintenance factory.

"Take off your clothes."

Were his first words to me. No introductions.

I hesitantly start to take them off with trembling hands. After my socks and my apron, it's my dress—

"Stop dilly-dallying!"

The inspector orders me, with only my lingerie on, and glares at me fiercely.

"Hurry up and take them off!"

Quite a few male inspectors have their eyes glued on me. "We're all grown men, what are you embarrassed for!" Hearing someone's taunt, the men laugh.

After taking off my clothes, they start to shame me further.

The men's hands crawl on my skin. Some do so mechanically, while some deliberately do it very indecently.

I am silent, letting them touch me as they please.

My thoughts are full of shame and disgust when the inspection ends.

Mental circuit scan, movement control confirmation, safety circuit check. The inspection procedures come one after another, while I am just made to move here and there in the factory.

They did not return my clothes to me. So I stayed nude. The cigarette box hanging from my neck is my only belonging.

Finally, I have to undergo the last ‘resale test’.

‘Resale test’ is an auction to return the robots that satisfy the safety standards to the market. If the robot does not have a buyer, it would be circulated to the second hand parts market— being dismantled, made into scrap metal.

Before the test starts, I have to put on a ‘collar’ in the waiting room. The collar is a tag used for product management, numbers and a bar code are printed on it.

I walk into the room for the resale test, seeing the round gallery conveyor spinning along. The other robots and I line up in a row, then sit onto the conveyor in turn.

With a slow speed of ten centimeters per second, I spin on the conveyor. On the other side of the cameras, the people are probably deciding if they should buy me, asking themselves questions like “Can this thing sell” “Does it have commercial value” and so on. Right now, I am just sitting blankly, thinking about trivial matters like “The ceiling is so white that it’s strange” “What day is today?” and so on.

Just like that, I continue to spin on the conveyor. The other robots spin along with me. This is the merry-go-round that controls our life or death.

During the tenth circle, I was taken down from the belt. Nobody wants to buy me.

My only future is to become scrap metal.

Day of Dismantling

I hear a deep ringing sound- clank, clank.

The conveyer belt is turning with a set rhythm.

Completely nude, I lie weakly on the ground.

I am at the special machine handling factory at the outskirts of Oval City— generally known as the robot processing factory. The moment that it was determined that I would become scrap metal, I was put onto a truck and sent here. It's the same for the other robots, but they look more like convicts who are about to go to the execution ground, as nobody is speaking.

Swaying around on the rack of the truck, I blankly think of the reason that nobody wants to buy me. Is it because my suicidal intentions were found out when I went through the mental circuit examination? Or is it because I'm modeled on Professor's sister, so I'm harder to sell? Or is it because the price of a new model robot is too expensive, so they all steer clear of me?

I don't know.

But I at least know this clearly.

I will be dismantled soon.

Why am I sitting here like this? Where did the warm, sweet happy times with Professor disappear to? The fact that I would be dismantled feels just like a dream.

I cannot escape. Using my safety circuit, my mental circuit had been thoroughly locked down. In addition, my battery is going to finish soon.

I wait for the moment that is gradually coming closer to me. The conveyer belt spins non-stop. The dismantlement level widens its jaws like a devil, coming close to me.

The cigarette case hung on my neck emitted a clanking noise, shaking violently on my breasts like a living creature.

When I reach the unpleasant, gray level, the arm of the dismantling machine catches hold of my right arm. Like a person being caught by the police, my elbows are twisted to my back with cracking noises. The alarm of a warning keeps ringing in my mind, so I immediately stop the program. It's useless now, anyway.

There are a few hundred protruding spots on the arm of the machine, and they suddenly start to wriggle like tentacles. The protruding spots squirt out a white, sticky substance that entangles my right arm. This liquid seems to be a fire extinguishing agent used to prevent something from catching fire. The hot, bubbling liquid looks somewhat similar to soapy water.

My right hand is surrounded by white bubbles, then the dismantlement arm shoots out a laser ray, starting to cut off my arm. The extreme pain made me cry out loud, so I reflexively shut down my sensory functions. If not, I would probably go crazy.

Not long after that, the sound of the artificial muscles tearing starts to echo. The tube that provides machine oil in my body has been cut. A zapping noise would be emitted every time the machine oil splatters onto the laser, and smoke with a disgusting smell is emitted at the same time.

Thirty two seconds after the process started, my right arm has been totally cut through.

After losing my right arm, next up is my left arm.

The arm of the dismantling machine twists my left arm. The hundreds of protruding spots suddenly spit out a white substance like a caterpillar undergoing metamorphosis, spreading them on my left arm. Smoke rose, then the laser draws an arc on my arm, thus removing it.

After that, my left arm leaves my body completely. The whole process took thirty four seconds.

After my arms, next up is my right leg.

The cut off part is fixated after a breaking sound and painted with the bubbles, then the blue laser shoots out, and the smoke with the disgusting smell drifts out.

As my leg is thicker than my arm, this procedure is more time consuming. One minute and eleven seconds in total.

At this moment, I notice that my right leg that had been cut off has a tag stuck onto it. That part will not belong to my body anymore, but will become ‘merchandise’ that will be sold in the second hand parts market.

My cut off right leg rolls to the recycling bin beside the conveyer belt. Tens of ‘legs’ from other robots are piled in the box like a chopped up corpse. Some legs are still squirming, and look extremely disgusting. The dismantling machine starts on my left leg after my right leg is done.

I could only stare at the blue laser blankly. I cannot focus my gaze on anything, while my vision is also blurry.

I wish that it would just end quickly. Even a second quicker would be good.

Thus, I start to run away from reality, thinking of Professor.

We planned to go to a theme park next week. We planned to watch another movie on the week after next. We planned to buy clothes next month. And the next one—

At this moment, the laser passes by my eyes. I suddenly thought of something. Is the laser the same as the laser guns used for suppressing the robots?

Oh yeah, talking about laser guns— I thought of another question.

What happened to the robot that went on a rampage at the fountain plaza?

When I come to my senses, my left leg have already disappeared. I'm not sure how long the process is.

I lie down on the conveyer belt, limbless.

After that, the process of cutting off my head starts.

Two dismantlement arms clamp my face between them. The cold, rough, hard machine arms. They're completely different from Professor's soft, gentle arms.

The cold machine arm places a blue scalpel on my neck. The hot blade comes closer bit by bit.

I am still running away from reality.

The place where I am running away to, is of course memories of Professor.

— she said that she had something to tell me after she comes today.

That was my last conversation with Professor.

That's right, Professor—

—what did she say…… yeah, present?

Professor.

What is the present that you spoke of?

A tearing sound echoes, then my head parts with my body.

A few tubes that are like blood vessels are hanging from the lower part of my head. I stare at my body through the front part of the tubes. My chest and abdomen are twitching non-stop like an alien organism.

The strange thing is, I don't even feel a trace of terror.

Different from when my arm was cut off, my heart is very calm. Next, I will calmly accept death. But this is not a sudden change of heart, not that I have seen through life and death, and not realization, but because my heart is starting to break down.

Finally, the dismantling hand comes closer to my head, the only part left.

Then they start to cut my head.

Firstly, my scalp is torn off, my maroon hair that I'm so proud of is stripped out along with my scalp. Next, the ball-shaped metal tool jabs into my eye socket, and my eyeball is gouged out with a 'pop(?)'. The gaze of my gouged-out right eyeball and the left eyeball left met. But then my left eyeball is immediately gouged out too.

Light disappears from my world.

Then, a stick-shaped object is stuffed into my ears. I have no way of identifying the object as I cannot see anymore. What seems to be the laser draws two circles on my face, then my ears and auditory system are taken off as well.

Sound disappears from my world.

The machine starts to peel off my skin, and I am slowly dissected like a fruit. Pulling out my teeth, pulling out my tongue, taking away my nose—

Not seeing anything. Not hearing anything. Not smelling anything. Not feeling anything.

Even so, I am still thinking of Professor until the last second.

Professor.

Where are you now, Professor?

Are you in heaven? Is it comfortable there? Are you eating well? Remember not to smoke on the bed.

Professor.

Where will I go next?

Is there a heaven for robots, too? What is the place like? Is the kitchen useful? Is the grocery shop shopkeeper nice?

Professor.

Why did you die?

Is it because I wasn't a good girl? Is it because I didn't watch the movie properly? Or is it because I didn't finish the report seriously?

Professor. I feel like seeing you. Really really really really feel like seeing you.

Am I still in time to see you? Can I enter the heaven for humans as a robot?

Professor.

Ahhh, Professor.

Is the heaven for humans near the heaven for robots—

Chapter 2 - Rebirth

“Welcome to the night time book club.” (Lilith Sunlight)

Day One

——

Swoosh.

——?

There’s a sound.

Like rain——

Like a bad quality television——

A piercing——

Noise.

Then, I wake up.

——me.

My consciousness gradually returns.

——……a……live…….?

I’m still alive—— at least, my mental circuit is not damaged to the extent that I cannot confirm the outside world.

Even so, my field of vision is not clear. My vision quality is extremely low, sand-like particles dance in front of my eyes. Besides that, there are those ‘lines’ that often appear in old movies. Quite a few white lines appear before me.

The most pressing matter is, my vision is monochrome— no color. This is a dull world with only black and white.

— What…… is with this?

I search for my memories in the blurry consciousness of my mind.

I became scrap metal in the dismantling factory. My arms and legs were removed, while my head and body had been cut off as well.

—Then, where is this?

My auditory setting gradually recovers its function. I can now differentiate the sounds around me.

“Oi, move it over there!” “Stop dawdling!” “Idiot, move quicker!” – angry shouts and noise rings in my surroundings. There’s also a heavy banging noise of metal.

—Construction…… site?

I look at my surroundings. However, my monochrome vision that had lost all color is unable to grasp the current situation. In addition, the white rain-like lines almost cover my field of vision. It feels as if I’m looking at this world through a pair of goggles full of scratches.

To understand the situation, I narrow my eyes for quite some time to think.

After that, I notice something.

— Who is this?

Noticing a presence, I turn my head around and see a robot.

This is an eccentric robot.

His head that is like a steel bucket is embedded with eyes that are like the lens of binoculars, and he also has a mouth that is actually a small speaker. His appearance is completely the style of last century experimental products made by science school students.

His body is also appalling. His left arm is shorter than his right arm for ten centimeters, each finger swollen as if they were scalded. His legs are non-existent, and what replaced that is a continuous track that is full of rust. The sizes and coordination of the parts on his body is very uncoordinated.

He's probably one of the simple robots made using some spare parts from second hand shops. The ones that are connected to a core of the system and a mental circuit, then forcibly reactivated robots. That's probably it.

Using some random parts, randomly making a robot. A tragic looking oddly shaped robot.

This robot stared at me from just now.

— what is it?

Feeling somewhat uncomfortable, I retreat backwards, and that robot went backwards at the same time.

—Eh?

I raise my 'right hand', then the robot raises his 'left hand'. It's like I'm looking at a mirror.

I look at my hands. At the tip of my fingers are five swollen fingers like what the robot in front of me has.

—Perhaps……

The possibility makes me tremble. Even so, a convinced feeling surge up in me. I had been dismantled, becoming scrap metal. How can I have my original body, then?

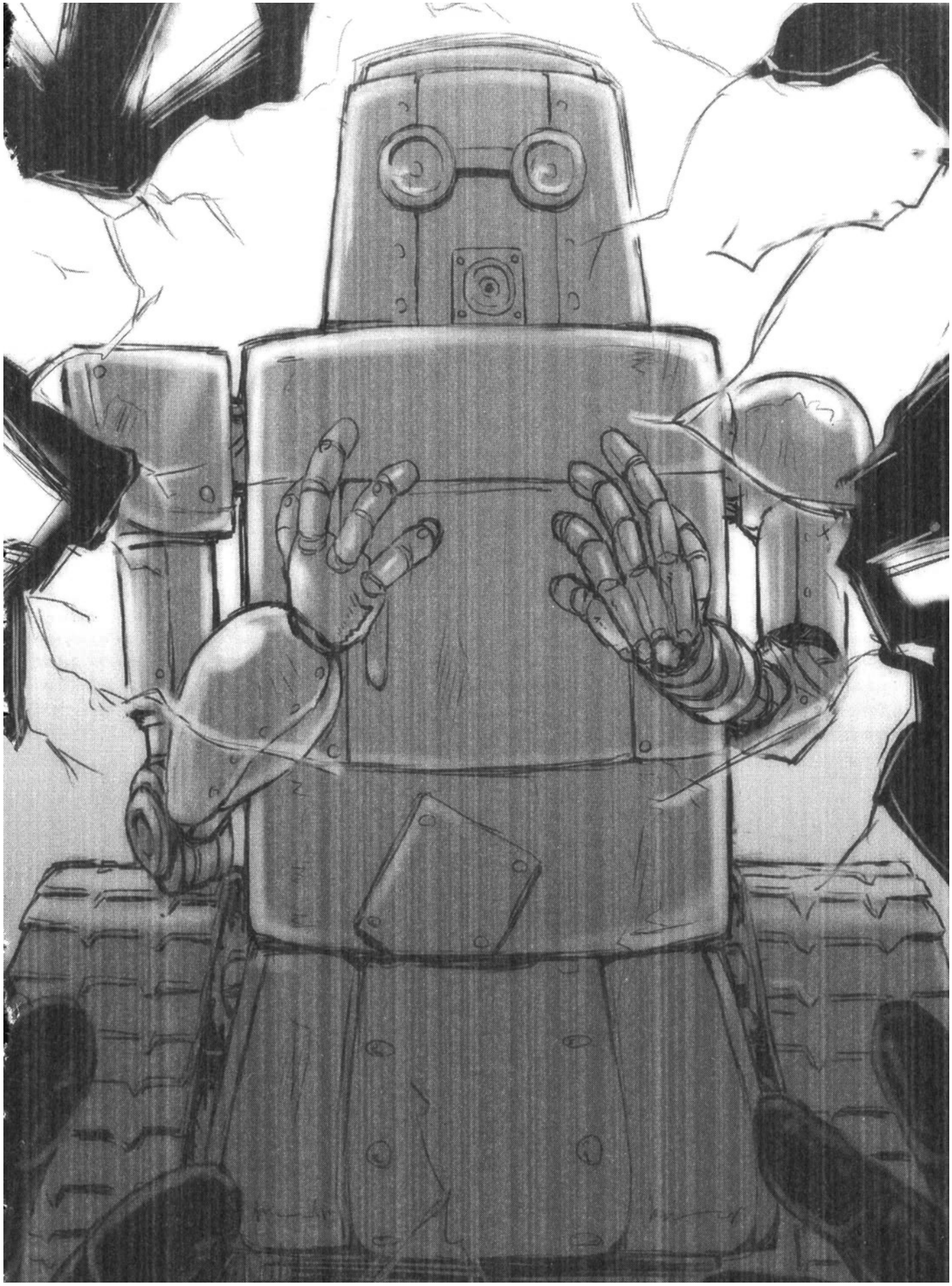
Which means—

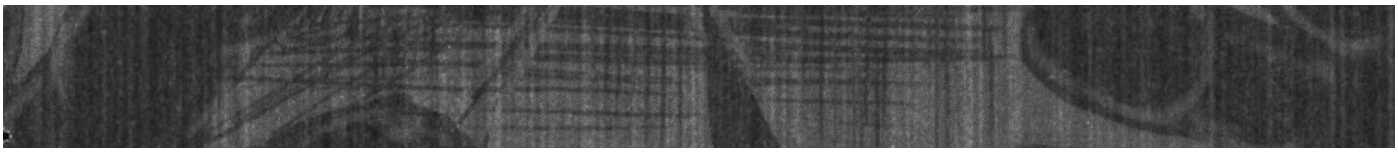
I turn my continuous track to get closer to 'him'. 'He' approaches me as well.

The strange robot reflected in the mirror is unquestionably, me.

♠

I stare at 'him' for a moment. As I am too shocked, I cannot say a word. Not even moving my body.





—This is…… me……

My thoughts cannot follow what is happening on myself.

I look at the robot in front of me once again. A head like an overturned bucket, eyes like binoculars, and a small speaker for a mouth. An exceptionally short left arm— no, is this the right arm—

"Mn……"

I start to feel nauseous. It is a strong sense of nausea that surges up from the bottom of my throat, as if my body is gradually rotting completely. My body undergo slight spasms for awhile, suppressing the vomit that would be impossible to come out.

After the feeling decreases, I suddenly start to detest 'him', in front of me. It is a self-disgust that is so severe that it can make people lose hope.

After that, I acted like I turned crazy— I might already be crazy, in reality— and start to hit my head on the mirror reflecting my outline. As though I can deny my current appearance by doing that.

It's a lie. No. I don't want to believe this. I curse the robot in front of me repeatedly.

Where are the sky blue eyes? Where are the slender limbs that I'm so proud of? My snow white skin? My maroon hair?

Why, why, is, is—

Why is such an ugly robot me?

Probably because of the impact of collision, a clanking sound suddenly comes from my skull. It seems that a part fell down.

—That's right.

I make up my mind. I don't need a body like this. I can just crush it to dust. Just let it be broken to pieces.

Therefore, I start to hit my head again. Using all my strength, hitting my head again and again. I cannot feel pain. Cracks appear on the mirror, and my head becomes somewhat deformed.

At that moment.

“Oi, new one! What are you doing!”

An angry roar echoes from behind me.

“Don’t move! This is an order!”

At the instant when I hear the order, my body suddenly freezes. My body cannot move, like it has been frozen solid.

A man in a gray clothing walks over to me. A badge that seems like a company logo is adorn on his chest.

The man walks to my front, and stares at me with dark eyes like a muddy quagmire.

“Charging…… seems to be okay. Listen, hurry up and go to your post!”

“Understood……”

My voice is no longer the voice of a young girl, but an ordinary electronic voice. That is a mechanical voice that lacks self-assurance.

My mind is still confused, but my body starts to move creakingly, going backwards slightly. At this moment, I realize that the thing that I rammed my head against is a large looking glass. Apart from the mirror, quite a lot of junk are piled up in the area.

“Hurry up and go! This is an order!”

The angry roar of the man caused my body to freeze up, and my continuous track start to move by itself.

I probably walked down from the slope for about a hundred meters or so. Steel bars, concrete and other construction materials are piled into a small hill in the area. Other robots are carrying these materials up the slope. It seems that carrying these construction materials is my new job.

Thus, I start to carry them. Though I don’t feel like doing that, I cannot disobey my orders. The compulsory command code hidden in my safety circuit caused myself to

move without being able to disobey the orders.

Where is this? Why am I doing this job? I have absolutely no idea. I carry the materials a few times, tens of times, going back and forth in the construction site. When I stop walking, angry shouts would fly over like an arrow. Every time, my body would freeze, and move without my permission like I'm being hypnotized.

Finally, the gray sun sunk down the horizons. Even so, the 'labor' still continues.

Late night. Finally finishing our work for the day, the other robots and I gather near a warehouse. Rubble and other waste materials were piled up in the warehouse, while square boards are arranged neatly in front of me. These one meter square boards are charging boards. The robots line up in a row in front of the charging boards, connecting the plug onto theirselves one after one. The scene looks like corpses from graves lining up to obtain nutrients.

I stand in front of the tombstone, waiting for my turn. When the workers appear, the cover in front of my chest is opened with a creak, then a thick wire is plugged into it.

Soon after, I lose my consciousness.

Day Two

Today, I continue to do the 'labor' that I did yesterday.

The labor that I am doing today is the same as yesterday. Carrying the discarded construction material— removing the rubble and steel bars that almost buried the horizons is the job of these robots. A large amount of discarded construction materials

are piled up here, and there are black, charred marks everywhere. It looks as though this places is the ruins that were left from an explosion of a large building.

At the other side of the ruins, the gray seas extend to afar. No, the seas should be blue. It's because my vision is monochrome, and can only differentiate white, black and gray, I would not know of the other colors.

My vision is still terrible. White lines in old movies still appear in my vision. The white noise is still ringing non-stop. So, I named this phenomenon 'rain'. The white lines are raindrops, the white noise is the sound of the rain. Only I can see it, and only I can hear it.

At the other side of the rain, there are over a hundred robots lined up untidily, carrying the waste construction materials as well. Most of their limbs do not match their bodies, as they are also robots made by combining second hand parts. They soundlessly carry the waste construction materials non-stop.

I carry the materials among them while thinking of what happened yesterday.

What am I doing here?

Created by Professor, living together with Professor, working for Professor, a robot owned exclusively by Professor. That is me.

However, what is with this current situation? The pretty, warm body of the young girl has disappeared. The only thing left is a combination of junk parts— binoculars for eyes, a small speaker for a mouth, a thick, short torso, and the continuous track on the lower part of my body— an ugly body that would make people feel like puking even with a glance.

I sunk into a self-disgust a few times today.

With a thud, an impact came from my head. A rock as large as a fist rolled in front of me.

"Stop dreaming, number 108!" the inspector's angry roar starts to ring, "Who says that you can rest! Hurry up and move it!"

"My apologies."

After apologizing with my electronic voice, I unsteadily turn my continuous track, moving onto the slope.

I start my forty third trip today.

Under the dreary, gray skies, I continue to do the depressing job. There are over a hundred colleagues on the slope in front of me, and countless tracks.

And I repeat the same process.

What am I doing here?

The arrival of night announced the end of the day.

I enter the warehouse, plugging the plug into my body.

Only on the moment when my power source is switched off, the rain will stop.

Day Eight

A week have passed, but I am still repeating the same actions.

As the labor robot ‘number 108’, I am still moving the waste construction materials as well. My vision is still monochrome, the sky, the sea and the land are all dyed in a gray color. The ‘rain’ has no sign of stopping. The white noise rang repeatedly, countless white lines interlacing in front of my eyes.

I would repeat the actions approximately one hundred and twenty times each day—between one hundred and sixteen times and one hundred and twenty eight times, to be exact, moving back and forth in the area. No rest. The labor everyday takes at least eighteen hours a day.

After going back and forth the area for about a thousand times, I understood a few things.

Firstly, the area is divided to two large areas. The ‘gut’ and the ‘intestines’.

Large machinery like cranes and lift trucks would remove the large pile of waste construction materials near the sea. The removed materials would be collected in the same place, piled up like a tall tower. That is the ‘gut’. The job of us robots is to go up the slope, and carry the waste construction materials in the ‘gut’ to the interior part of the area, the ‘intestines’. Traversing between the gut and the intestines is our job.

The distance for going back and forth is about two hundred meters, as the slope is somewhat steep. The surface of the road makes it hard for us to walk on, as our continuous tracks would be stained with the soil on the ground. The reason that the truck for moving the waste construction materials cannot enter the area, is exactly because the ground is too soft.

By the way, the waste construction materials are christened junk food. Junk would be similar to waste, but I’m not sure how the word came to be.

There are also quite a variety of waste construction materials, such as flattened steel bars, rubble stained with soil and charred metal pieces. Weapons and the remains of explosives could be seen occasionally as well. Then, probably this place is a facility connected to the military? The area is surrounded with a tall, steel wire gauze, brewing a stern, strict atmosphere.

Today, us robots are moving the ‘junk food’ from the ‘gut’ to the ‘intestines’ as well. After moving the waste construction materials to the gut, we have to place them on a conveyer belt. As the name ‘intestines’ suggests, the shape of the conveyer belt is just like large and small intestines. At the other side of the transport equipment, tens of workers in gas masks are sorting out the waste materials.

At first, I thought that the workers are humans too. But from their movements and the serial number that they are shouted at by the angry inspectors, they are all robots. I don’t know the reason for them wearing the gas masks, but probably they’re coming in contact with materials that would harm robots.

In short, almost all of the workers working in this dismantling construction site are robots. The job of the humans is only to keep watch and to give orders. We would do labor for them like slaves, doing labor like ants carrying the remains of food, carrying the waste materials non-stop. After the day stops, we would return to our nest.

In this week, I did not think of Professor. Every time I couldn’t help but remember it, I would forcibly seal my emotions in my heart. That is because I believe, if I face my own memories when dealing with reality, I would not be able to hang on anymore.

Thus, I gradually stopped thinking. What I am doing, why am I doing this— days passed, and the questions stopped surfacing in my mind.

From goodness knows when, I became one of the silent, gray robots.

Day Fifteen

In the monochrome world where the sky and earth lost all color, I went back and forth at the construction site today as well. From the gut to the intestines, the intestines to the gut.

Going back and forth in a place like this for a thousand eight hundred and twelve times, I would see my 'colleagues' even if I don't want to. As the time passes, their gray silhouettes that were like steel specters were stacked up higher and higher in my empty heart. Like an uninhabited room that gathered dust.

Apart from that, because of the sad nature of robots, after I arranged my data, I formed a conclusion.

The details are as follows.

- **Total number of labor robots** …… 110

* Only the robots carrying the materials between the gut and the intestines are counted.

- Category A (Height)

Below one meter …… 23

Above one meter, below two meters …… 81

Two meters and above ……. 6

- Category B (Type)

Made from junk parts …… 93

Second-hand robots …… 17

* Judged from appearance.

- Category C (Movement System of Lower Body)

Continuous tracks …… 82

Four legs …… 26

Two legs …… 2

At first, they were just numbers without any meaning or emotions.

But for me, the latter numbers— especially the ‘two legs ……2’ in category C, meaning was rapidly born in me.

They are numbers Fifteen and Thirty-Eight.

— Who are they?

While moving the waste materials, I adjust the angle of my lenses.

My vision first stop on the huge robot that had both height and width of over two meters — identification number ‘Fifteen’.

Powerful limbs grew from his gray body that was like a barrel. Only his feet were black like he was wearing boots. His humongous body would make him eye-catching anywhere.

Number Fifteen has overwhelming strength, he could easily use his arms to lift waste materials weighing a few hundred kilograms. He strode in the construction site today as well. As a two legs-type, his footprints that were like footprints of elephants formed numerous pits. My colleagues and I would trip on these pits at least three times a day.

There is another person that I am concerned of.

Her.

That's right, not him, but her. The other two legs-type robot— identification number 'Thirty-Eight'.

She is taller than me for about two heads, and is about a hundred and forty centimeters by my estimation. She wore work clothes like those of carpenters, and her long hair tied with a ribbon hangs in front of her right shoulder. With an energetic stride, she carried the waste materials and went back and forth in the construction site today as well.

Among the hundred over robots, nobody else looks more like a human than her. Her body was not pieced together by junk parts. Her limbs and her body seem to be unique parts.

In addition, the young girl robot – number Thirty-Eight- and the giant robot – number Fifteen- often worked together. They would sometimes walk shoulder to shoulder, deep in conversation.

What were they talking about? Who are they? While moving the waste materials, I could not help but ponder about the two.

As for why I would have these feelings, I don't even know myself.

Even so, I felt that only when my gaze followed their movements, I could get a slight relief from this cruel reality.

Day Thirty-Two

From the day when I arrived at the construction site, a month had already passed.

I still mind about *those two* right until now. The chubby giant robot and the petite young robot girl— numbers Fifteen and Thirty-Eight.

A clearly contrasting duo.

First, the giant robot, number Fifteen.

He has a large body, but his movement is slow. Though he looks courageous, carrying a huge stack of waste materials with large steps, he would trip because of the mud on the next instant. Also, his appearance after he tripped, his face to the sky while waving his limbs like a bug— to put it bluntly, it looks quite hilarious.

On the other hand, the movements of the young robot girl – number 38 – are quite nimble. She passes through the other robots like a gust of wind. She looks somewhat like a cat or a squirrel, giving others the impression of a small but lithe animal.

Whenever the young robot girl passes by the giant robot, number Fifteen, they would always say something. Basically, they were all short responses like 'Hey!' 'Still okay?' 'I'm off!' and so on, and then she would lightly tap on the giant's waist.

Those two looks just like friends that know each other for a long time.

However, our paths do not intersect.

At the construction site, my robot colleagues do not have any notion of 'socializing'. They would just carry the waste materials from dawn till dusk, and their day would end right after their switches are turned off at late night. Here, there is only the 'longitudinal' relationship of robots following the humans' orders, and no 'horizontal' relationship between robots. No conversation, and no mutual aid.

Numbers Fifteen and Thirty-Eight are not the only robots who can talk. I saw many other robots answer 'Yes' 'Understood' 'My apologies' and so on after being ordered by the human inspectors. Some of them say 'sorry!' when they bump into the others as well.

Even so, I have never saw any robots talking to each other in the whole month that I've been here, except for numbers Fifteen and Thirty-Eight.

And that's why these two are the most special existences in the hundred over robots.

Day Forty-Four

The point of intersection suddenly appears. That was the forty-forth morning that I arrived here.

After I finished moving the waste materials to the ‘intestines’, someone starts up a conversation with me on my way back.

“You over there, wait a sec.”

“Eh?”

I turn my head over, the young girl— identification number ‘Thirty-Eight’ appears before my eyes. Work clothes with large pockets are worn over her slender body. Her large, graceful eyes stare at me directly.

The girl’s white face approaches me from above. I couldn’t help but lean my body backwards. It’s been a while since I felt this excited.

“What’s your identification number?”

“…… Eh?”

I couldn’t understand what the young girl meant at that moment. The fact that the young girl that I was observing from afar suddenly struck a conversation with me surprised me quite a lot, and I didn’t speak to anyone for a month or so now.

I give her a meaningless response “I- Identification number?”, while a troubled expression appears on the girl’s face.

“Don’t you…… remember your own identification number? See, it’s the number that the inspector shouts when calling you.”

Right at this moment, the girl places her hands on her hips, tilting her beautiful head slightly. Her hair that is bound with a large bow swings in front of her chest like a swing. Her appearance is very cute, full of life and vigor of a blooming sunflower.

“Erm…… I…… am number Hundred and Eight.”

I finally give her an answer. Right until now, I still cannot believe that the inorganic electronic voice belongs to me.

“Number Hundred and Eight huh…… That must mean you came here recently.” The young girl walks forward while introducing herself, “I am number Thirty-Eight, my name is Lilith. Nice to meet you.”

Lilith. I finally know the girl’s name. It sounds a bit similar to mine.

“Ah, don’t stop. We’ll get scolded if we don’t move. ……. And then, I have something to ask you.”

After saying that, Lilith stares at me with an interested gaze.

“Why do you keep staring at me recently?”

I was found out.

I don’t know what to say, so I could only answer ‘So sorry’.

“Ah, it’s okay.” Lilith waves her hands slightly, “There’s no need for you to apologize. I just want to know the reason that you stared at me. …… Perhaps it’s love at first sight?”

Lilith starts to laugh heartily, her large eyes gently narrowed into a line. She looks rather childlike. She might even be younger than myself, being set as fifteen before this.

“Erm…… Well…… I really minded you two.”

“Two?”

“Miss Lilith and Mr. Fifteen.”

“Number Fifteen…… Ohhh, do you mean Volkov?”

Volkov. I just found out the name of the giant robot, number Fifteen.

Lilith continues to ask: “Why were you interested?”

At that moment, I reached the ‘gut’, and raised the waste construction materials before answering her. Lilith moved the materials to her shoulders as well. After that, we turned over and walked towards the ‘intestines’.

The conversation starts again.

“You two seem like you know each other well.”

“Eh, does it look like that?”

Lilith’s tone raises slightly. The corner of her mouth raises slightly as well, so it seems like she’s rather happy about this.

After fifteen minutes.

“…… Huh? Does that mean you’ve been stalking us?”

“No, I didn’t stalk……”

We carry the waste materials towards the ‘intestines’ again. Lilith walked with me for three turns.

“Mr. Volkov passed by me a few times before this. But, well…… He ignored me.”

“Oh, that!” Lilith shrugged, “That guy’s eyesight and hearing isn’t that good. So I think he wasn’t ignoring you, but just didn’t notice you.”

Lilith just called Volkov ‘that guy’. It sounds like they were a married couple living together for a long time.

“Oh, I see. That’s how things are.”

“That’s why you have to do this when calling that guy.”

After saying that, Lilith steps forward and lightly taps Volkov’s waist. After that, she asks, as if she wants to walk into a public restroom.

“Is there anyone here? Is there anyone here?”

Volkov suddenly turns his head over, answering ‘Oh~ Yes, yes’ like he’s really in one.

“You see~” Lilith shows me a bright, sunny smile, “You must do that if you want to talk to Volkov. If not, he’ll never notice you.”

“Oh…… So there’s a technique to it.”

“This person was created as a military robot before this. That’s why…… He has some glitches from the days when he was at war.”

“Miss Lilith seems to understand Mr. Volkov quite well.”

“Stop.”

Lilith uses her hand that isn’t holding waste construction material to halt me.

“The *Miss* that you’re calling me with, can you stop that?”

“Eh?”

Lilith’s brow rises slightly, and she stares at me with her large eyes that are both childish and wise.

“We’re already friends, so you don’t need to address me unnecessarily. I am Lilith Sunlight.”

“Sunlight…… That’s a great name.”

I frankly express my thoughts. This is a name that suits a sunny person like her.

“Re- Really?” Lilith looks very happy, “…… That’s right, this person is called Voulkov Galosh.”

“No, it’s Volkov Galosh.” —the giant immediately turns around and corrects her.

“Eh, you heard that?”

“Lilith- made- mistake.”

“Isn’t it better if you change your name to ‘Voulkov’? This name suits you better.”

“Voulkov- wrong. Volkov- is- Volkov.”

“Really, I can’t joke with you……”

Lilith laughs mischievously, then turns around.

“That’s right, you do have a name, right? Seeing as you look used to this, your ‘birthplace’ should be okay, right?”

I tentatively speak my name.

“I am Iris. …… Iris Rain Umbrella.”

“Iris……? Eh, it seems like a girl’s name.”

“Erm, well……”

At that moment, angry roars from the inspector flew over.

“Oi, private conversations are prohibited! Numbers Fifteen and Thirty-Eight! And…… Number Hundred and Eight!”

After shouting ‘Sorry!’ loudly, Lilith sticks out her tongue at me.

Day Fifty-Five

After that, the time I spent with the two increased day by day. They are the first friends that I made after coming to the construction site.

The ‘rain’ did not stop. In my monochrome vision, there are still white noise and countless white lines.

“And then~”

While we were walking from the ‘gut’ to the ‘intestines’, Lilith continued to talk happily at the other side of the rain. She’s just like a chatterbox.

“The inspector shouted ‘Oi, number Fifteen, don’t just stand there!’, and kicked Volkov.”

I answered: “Is that so!”

“Then, do you know what that guy answered?”

“What did he answer?”

“He said…… ‘My apologies. I’ll sit down right away!’ because the inspector said ‘don’t just stand there’, he sat down. So, his huge body squashed the inspector behind him.”

“That’s quite dangerous.”

“The shrieking noise that the inspector shouted out that time was so interesting!”

“That’s quite a masterpiece.”

Lilith started to laugh heartily. Seeing her sunny smile, I brightened up.

“Actually how did you meet Volkov?”

“Oh, that.” Lilith raised her brows, “It’s no big deal. We met at the construction site about a year ago. Volkov was already working here when I came…… I felt that he looked similar.”

“Looked similar…… to whom?”

“An acquaintance from before. He’s a robot called Lightning, I worked with him at a junk parts shop before this. He’s really big but slow as well.”

At that moment, Lilith gazed towards somewhere far away.

“So, that’s why I noticed Volkov when I arrived. …… I struck a conversation with him after that, and started talking to him……”

The blaring sirens suddenly rang. That’s the message signaling lunch. However, lunch time is only a treatment for the humans, us robots don’t have any rest time, the only time when we can rest is the charging time at night.

“Then I’ll see you later then.”

Lilith left my side, nimbly passing through the robots in front. Her bound long hair danced behind her in vigor.

I looked at the direction that she was moving towards, and saw a giant-sized robot walking forward step by step. That’s Volkov. He’s mass-producing enormous footprints today as well. The petite girl knocked his large body while asking ‘Is there anyone in there?’.

I gazed at the familiar actions of the two, and I couldn't help but feel warm inside. It's a long time since I had this warm feeling.

I thanked the two in my heart. Though I cannot accept my current appearance, I am not as troubled about it as I was. They accepted my current appearance. To be honest, that makes me quite happy.

If I could make an expression, I would probably be smiling right now.

♠

After the labor ended for the day, we gathered at the warehouse as usual.

We would not be arranged by identification number. Since the main reason that we're herded in the warehouse is to prevent us from being stolen and for charging, sitting anywhere wouldn't matter.

Today, Lilith sat beside me.

"Hey, Iris."

"Hmm?"

Lilith said in a small voice: "Accompany me tonight". A meaningful smile surfaced on her face.

"Eh? Accompany you?"

As I was about to ask her what she meant, the inspectors were already near us.

After the charging cable is inserted into my body, my switch is immediately turned off. It would be the second morning the next time I wake up— that was what I thought.

—…… Iris!

I hear someone's voice.

—Hey, Iris!

In the drizzle that is present as usual, I opened my eyes.

The familiar face of a young girl is in the rain.

"…… Lilith?"

"Ah, you're finally awake. …… Your activation time took a long time."

Lilith pulled out the charging cable from my body, and closed the cover on my chest with a clunk.

I only noticed at that time that it was still pitch dark. Usually, rays of light would come in from the windows of the warehouse.

"…… Eh? Nighttime?"

"That's right, it's still night time. About two in the morning."

"Two in the morning……"

I look around the whole warehouse. It's the first time that I woke up at this time.

"Iris, I'll serve you."

Lilith showed me a delighted smile.

"…… serve?"

I tilt my head.

So, the girl steps backwards lightly and extends her white right hand, as though she's inviting me for a dance.

"Welcome to the night time book club."

The warehouse looks eerie at night.

My robot colleagues sat tidily in front of the charging board that were like tombstones. Of course, nobody moved. On the robots, the charging light flickered like wandering spirits. Lilith and I walked in the spaces between the hundred over spirits.

A familiar large robot sat among the flickering spirits. A thick cable was stuck to his bum like a tail, while the lights showing that he's charging emitted rays of flashing light.

"Take that!"

Lilith removed Volkov's charging cables with her hands. After that, she opened the cover on his chest, sticking her right hand in it and started to search.

After a few seconds, a low hum echoed in the warehouse, and Volkov's eyes brightened.

"Get up quickly, junk."

Lilith is scolding people again.

Volkov said while maintaining his posture on the ground: "Volkov- activating- cannot-move."

"Shhh! Keep quiet when you're talking."

Lilith lowers her voice to remind him.

While waiting for Volkov to reactivate, I ask the question that I was concerned of.

"Why can Lilith wake up yourself? The power switch had definitely been turned off……"

"Ahhh, that."

Lilith triumphantly points at her chest with her thumb.

"My battery is the charge-activated type. Which means, my power would automatically turn on after charging ends."

I can't help but think "Ah, so that's why". That means, she could reactivate herself even if the humans turned off her power. However, another question surfaces in my mind.

"But your charge-activation switch actually didn't get confiscated by the humans?"

If robots could move all around the warehouse at night, turning off their power at night would lose its purpose.

"It doesn't matter, since it's quite easy. There's a lot of chances for you to move tools and spare parts when you stay here for a long time. That's why, I just help myself sometimes."

After that, she proudly told me about her finding a lot of household items (Only that they're broken or too dirty), books, music CDs and recorders among the waste materials

at the construction site. She didn't have a hint of guilt on her face when she was happily introducing me to her 'war spoils'. I asked half-impressed, half-helplessly.

"But robots can't do actions that are against the rules, right? Why can Lilith steal them then?"

"Oh, you're probably referring to the code for prevention of rule violation in the safety circuit. That's no problem, because I— oh."

Just at that moment, Volkov stood up slowly. His large body emitted a creaking sound, creating a long shadow in the warehouse. His eyes that gave out light in the darkness was full of vigor.

"Never mind, I'll save the details for next time. Let's move right now."

Lilith walked further into the warehouse.

"Erm, is it really okay if we're only half charged up?"

"It's okay, two or three hours of use should be enough."

"Huh……"

I turned my continuous track and followed behind her. Volkov followed behind us as well.

A small hill of waste materials were stacked up in the interior of the warehouse, remains of continuous tracks and objects that looked like human limbs were scattered all over. Those would probably be parts of robots. By the amount, it's even enough for someone to open two or three junk parts shops.

We walked past the small hill of waste materials, and arrived at a wide area not long after. Its only at this place that the materials were pushed aside, showing a space of about three meters square. A mat was placed below the square wooden table, and this scene would look just like a scene from a movie if you ignore their worn down look.

The three of us surrounded the table.

"So there's somewhere like this in the warehouse……"

I looked around in surprise. The table was completely surrounded by scrap metals, and seemed that a landslide would happen at any time.

“That’s right, Iris.”

Lilith searched below the table and took out a thick book.

“Can you read?”

Lilith took out a children’s literary book. I read out the title of the book.

“…… Third-rate Demon God Visa Darke.”

“Excellent!” Lilith cheered with her eyes gleaming, “You can read! That’s great! Hurray!”

“No, it’s just a small matter……”

Hearing Lilith’s exaggerated praise, I couldn’t help but feel rather embarrassed. It’s really not such a complicated book, as ‘suitable for children of eight and above’ was written on the front of the book.

A young man (a rather handsome young man) wearing a black overcoat, leaning against a wall, with a sparkling white ring on his left hand was on the cover of the book. Though I’ve only heard of the title, it seems that this is quite a famous work.

“I can’t read recently. My language interpretation parts malfunctioned. Volkov can still read, but he can’t read words that are too small. …… So this is the only thing that we could do.”

Right after that, Lilith opened the book and extended it to Volkov’s front. It’s just like she’s using the book to cover Volkov’s whole vision.

Then, Volkov spoke the word ‘demon’. Lilith shifted the book, and he said ‘god’, then he continued with ‘vi’ and ‘sa’ after repeating the procedure.

Lilith closed the book and shrugged while saying: “He could only read one word at a time. …… So about fifty pages used up about three months.”

“Volkov- tried- hard.” The giant robot puffed up his chest.

“Mnn hmm, you did try hard~” Lilith smiled slightly like a kindergarten teacher.

“Volkov- did- great.”

“Very great, very great~”

Lilith stood up and patted Volkov's head as if she was comforting a child. Volkov seemed to be quite happy as well. I wonder what kind of relationship these two have.

"So, how about it?"

She looked closely at my face.

"I'll thank you, so can you read the book for me?"

"Mnn, it's okay……" I took the book from Lilith's hands, "Where should I read from?"

"It's better if you read from the start. It's such a pity if you finish it in one go. …… Ah, Volkov, you can go back now if you want to."

Lilith said with a bullying voice, while Volkov's eyes brightened.

"Volkov- wants to know- story."

"Oh, is that so."

"Only Lilith- too sly."

"I'm joking, I'm joking. …… I really can't joke with you."

Lilith started to laugh. She seems very happy whenever she teases Volkov.

"I'll start reading then." I turned to the first page, "Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke. First Volume 'The Demon God who Can't Use Magic'. …… er, prologue."

Just like that, the three of us started our 'night time book club' meeting.

" 'And then?' Darke said coldly, 'Are you saying that destroying the world is the job of a demon god?' After hearing his questions, the ring answered unhesitatingly: 'That's exactly the case, Master Darke.' ."

I slowly read the book.

Lilith sat beside me, leaning her body forward from the table with her large eyes gleaming. On the other hand, Voklov kept his silence, but his eyes would light up occasionally. Both of them seem to like this book very much.

After about thirty pages, I gained a rough understanding of the story of 'Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke'.

The main character, Visa Darke, is a demon god. He is a lord that commands part of the demon world, comes from an exalted family, but is uninterested in his job as a demon god. The cause that he dedicated himself to is not using his powers to invade other countries or causing disasters in the human world, but to fix the tools collected from all around the demon world so that they could be used again.

The magic ring that served Darke is 'Flo Snow'. She is an exquisite ring that is white as snow, while her voice is clear like ice. Having a serious personality, she often berates her master who always fixes tools, putting aside his obligations as a demon god. However, Darke forgot about his job again today, not learning from his mistakes at all. He hid the truth from Flo and sneaked out of the city—

"Iris, what's next? What did Darke say?"

Lilith pulled on my elbow, urging me to carry on with the story. I just read until the part that she hadn't reached, which is why she is harrying me with words like 'Faster, faster' 'What's next' in a rapid-fire speed.

"Okay, let's continue. …… 'Hey, Flo. My magical powers are very weak. So isn't it okay if I rely on magical tools a bit?' Darke spoke to Flo Snow in a lazy tone as usual. So, Flo immediately admonished him with a displeased tone. 'That's just an excuse, Master Darke. Your magical powers aren't weak, you just lack practice. Ahh, this is too tragic. If this goes on, you would be unable to face your deceased ancestors.' "

On the night after their conversation, one of the magical tools that Darke brought back suddenly turned into an abominable monster after Darke lied down on his bed. The monster snuck into Darke's bedroom—

"Shh!"

Suddenly, Lilith placed her index finger in front of her lips.

"Turn off the lights!"

Volkov immediately switched off the lights in his eyes. I turned off the illumination system in my visual settings as well.

"It's the patrols."

Lilith's index finger stopped in front of her lips, while her sharp gaze was focused on the entrance of the warehouse.

After that, I saw a dim light moving in the warehouse. Probably it's a patrol holding a torch. The searchlight flitted from one sleeping robot to another.

As a lot of junk are piled up around us, 'this place' can't be seen from the entrance. Even so, we would still tremble in fear every time the lights shone onto here.

After five minutes, Lilith said lightly 'I think he's gone……' after glancing outside from the seams between the junk, then returned to the side of the table.

I was relieved, then lightly rubbed my chest. Volkov gave out a 'Hu~" noise as well.

"We actually didn't get exposed."

Lilith said in a light tone: "It's no big deal. The patrols just shine the torch here an there. They wouldn't count the number of robots."

"What would happen if we were found out?"

"Who knows…… Probably they wouldn't just dismantle us to scrap metal. …… However, they would probably confiscate these."

She took the book from my hands, hiding it beneath the table.

"Aren't we going to continue?"

"Though I really~ care about it, that's all for today. They'll get suspicious if our batteries aren't charged to the max."

The meeting of the book club ended just like that.

As for what Darke saw after he heard the strange noises, that would have to continue tomorrow, two in the morning.

Day Sixty-Nine

In the monochrome world where the sky and the earth looks unpleasant, I'm continuing my labor today as well. Endlessly walking back and forth in the never-ending rain.

Lilith would come by my side sometimes, and would leave after talking for awhile.

Basically, Volkov and I can talk to each other now. Every time I lightly tap his large body, asking 'Anyone inside?', he would turn his head around, giving an odd answer 'Oh~ There is, there is'.

At night, we would start the long-anticipated meeting of the night time book club. After I started reading for two weeks, we speedily reached the sixth volume of 'Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke'. There are eight volumes in the series, so we're already at the last part of the story. To summarize the story from volume one to volume five, most of them are like 'Demon God Darke would sneak out of the castle every time, bringing back a magical tool'→ 'Get scolded by magical ring Flo Snow' → 'The magical tool is actually really powerful……'. The conversations between the black shirted demon god and the serious silver ring in each volume are very interesting, not only Lilith and Volkov, even I'm addicted to the story as well.

However, the style of the sixth volume differs from the previous volumes. Darke left Flo, and went on a journey himself, losing contact from each other for a month. After time passed, Flo, who was rather angry at the start, started to worry, and realized her 'true feelings'. She, who always told Darke off, actually— just like that, the relationship between the two started to develop.

Time flies. Unknowingly, I've been here for two months already. That means that Professor had passed away for two months now.

About this matter, it's better if I don't think so much about it.

After two at late night.

In the warehouse shrouded in darkness, the charging lights of the robots flickered like fireflies. A corner of the warehouse was shone on by the moonlight, and that's the place where we have our small party.

"Read the passage just now again."

Lilith used her fingers to lightly tap on my elbow. If we reach a part where she cares about, she would immediately ask me to reread it.

"Flo thought. Until now, did she really help Darke."

“Hmm……”

Lilith tilted her head while hugging her knees, it seems that she felt uneasy about this part.

In this part of the story, the magical ring Flo Snow seemed to be quite troubled recently.

She was quite confident in her ability to educate as she started to serve the Darke family from last generation. Though Darke would say harsh words, he would still listen to Flo’s advice in the end, so it didn’t trouble her. Even I, who’s reading the book, has the feeling that ‘Ahh~ Their thoughts are really connected’.

However, Darke left Flo, not even sending messages to her for the month that he’s absent. Such a thing never happened in the past. Flo felt uneasy now that she’s alone, and kept thinking to herself the whole day. Darke kept trying his best as a demon god up till now, but is she just a fussy and troublesome presence to him? Also, she knows that her ‘true feelings’— her love for Darke would definitely trouble him, so this made her troubled.

“…… Flo Snow.”

Lilith quietly said.

“How should I say this, she worries too much. Since she’d been together with Darke for such a long time, she should be more confident in herself.”

Lilith defended the stand of the troubled ring. I feel the same as well.

Then, Volkov asked.

“But- Darke- didn’t- return. Why?”

“That’s because……”

Unusually, Lilith was at a loss of words. Though Darke is random and childish, he’s actually kind and honest. Thus, there must be a reason that he couldn’t come back immediately.

“Iris, please continue to read.”

Lilith poked my elbow. I raised the book and said: “Then let us continue.”

At that moment.

“Ah……”

The book slid down from my hands like a living creature.

“Eh, are you alright?”

Lilith picked up the book.

While apologizing, I took the book. The ‘rain’ became more and more serious recently, so getting a grasp of distance is rather hard for me.

“Flo thought. Did she really help Dark up till now. Then, she started to think again.”

In the rain, my gaze moved with the words. The white lines that were like the clouds appearing from the end of a jet formed on top of the words.

“If she couldn’t help Darke, how would she continue to live.”

Then, I closed the book.

“What is it, Iris?”

Lilith stared at my face in surprise.

I expressed my own feelings.

“The sentence just now, don’t you care about it?”

“Eh…… Which sentence?”

“If she couldn’t help Darke…… that part.”

Flo Snow’s thoughts are exactly what I was pondering about after I came to the construction site.

—If I cannot help, how can I continue to live?

Working everyday without rest, turning off my power source when night comes, waking up in the morning. And the process repeats every day. Is there any meaning to living like this? I, who could not help Professor, does my existence still have any value?

My questions combined with Flo Snow’s worries that she could not help the demon god.

Thus, I asked my question.

“Well, ‘living’…… what is it, actually?”

The first person who answered was Lilith.

“Mnn…… Living……”

She uneasily tilted her head.

“As long as you’re not dead…… that’s living, right?”

“Ah, no, I don’t mean that.”

I continued my question.

“I should phrase it like this, that’s right…… the meaning of existence. To robots like us, what is ‘living’, and our ‘meaning of existence’— the question that I’m thinking about is this.”

“Sorry, I have absolutely no idea about what you said.”

“Erm, which is to say…… Don’t Flo Snow live for the demon god Darke? That’s her meaning of existence. Then, what’s our meaning of existence?”

I tried to explain, while Lilith said ‘Ah…… So that’s what you meant’. She seemed to have understood the meaning of my question just now.

I anticipated her answer.

She directly said.

“Things like meaning of existence are questions that only idlers would think about.”

“…… Eh? Idlers?”

“To be exact, only robots that have great lives would think about this. …… Poor robots like us don’t need a meaning for existence. As long as our battery content and parts haven’t broken down completely, even though the day that we would become scrap metal would come, isn’t that the meaning of our existence?”

She said in a logical tone.

“Err, sorry. Your meaning is……”

“Which means, living is ‘a struggle to the finish’.”

Lilith said in a rough tone. Her words had some power in it.

At that moment, Volkov interrupted lightly: “I- think- that’s- wrong.”

“Mnn?” Lilith raised one of her brows, then turned over to face Volkove, “Hey, I’ll say, you dare to have opinions that differ from I, Lilith Sunlight?”

Lilith leisurely teased Volkov.

However, Volkov really doesn’t know how to joke. He answered seriously: “Volkov- have- opinions.”

“Differs- from Iris’.”

His square eyes faced me.

“Lilith- meant- living- or dying. …… Iris- meant- why- we- live.”

After hearing Volkov’s explanation, I was delighted. Because Volkov deciphered the meaning of my question.

“That’s right, that’s right! What Volkov said what exactly what I meant! The meaning of our existence would mean ‘why do we live’!”

“Volkov, what do you think? The meaning of our existence. Why do we continue to live?”

I asked quickly, while he answered slowly after hesitating for awhile.

“Volkov- don’t- know.”

Then, he unusually continued to speak.

“Volkov- entered- wars. Volkov- killed- a lot. …… Humans- Robots- killed- a- lot.”

Hearing his words, my body couldn’t help but cringe. Lilith stared at Volkov seriously.

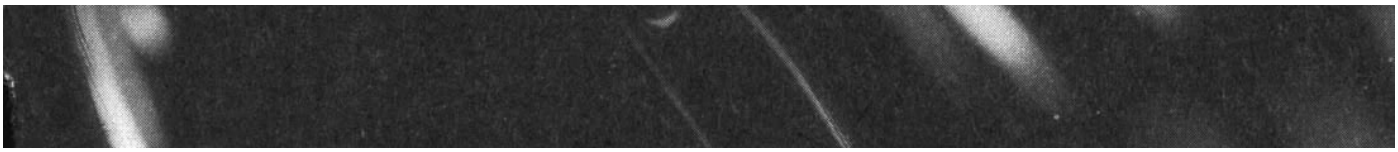
“Volkov- knows- ways- to- kill.”

I saw that a sorrow shone in his eyes.

“But- don’t- know- ways- to- live.”

After saying that, he sank into a silence.”

Silence came upon the warehouse.



After a long time, Lilith silently said "……. Is that so".

"That's okay, it's alright even if you don't know. ……. I don't know either."

Lilith's gaze towards Volkov was rather gentle. She would look at Volkov with that expression occasionally.

"Also, complicated questions like the meaning of existence—"

She glanced at the windows of the warehouse.

"Even humans would have trouble answering that."

Day Seventy-Three

In the gray world that lost all color, I go back and forth in the construction site as usual. The waste materials accumulated in the gut are slowly moved to the intestines, and are then digested.

The rain is getting heavier. The vision on my right side is especially blurry, and vertical bars were present in the surrounding scenery. The noise of the pouring rain troubled me, as usual, causing me to be unable to hear the voices of the others clearly. Even so, the angry roars of the inspectors could still be heard.

Apart from that, there's another thing that I'm rather conscious of.

—clank.

When I moved the waste materials, the noise rang again.

—clank, clank.

The noise rang in my skull. It's like a small rock is bumping on the interior of my skull.

The noise emerged after I had this body, and it might just be caused by the incident when I rammed into the mirror. Though it decreased for awhile, it seems that it became rather rhythmic now. Even when I turn my neck, the clear noise would be heard.

What on earth is that noise— I pondered on the question when I moved about.

Actually, it wouldn't even trouble me when compared with the rain, just that it would cause a clanking noise. Probably it's just a loose screw or nut.

I walked forward in the clanking noise, and I couldn't help but feel that I'm just like a toy that would give out noise whenever I walk.

After the work ended for the day, it's finally time for reading again.

"On that silent night, Flo Snow left the castle of the demon god. …… to be continued."

I finished the sixth volume of 'Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke'. There's just two volumes left.

After about three months, Darke finally returned. However, he wouldn't answer whenever Flo asked him where he went. While Flo was relieved by his return, she was hurt because of his silence. Hence, she 'ran away from home' at the end of the sixth volume. That's because she felt that she was a presence unneeded by Darke.

"Hmmmm!"

Lilith moaned, as if she couldn't take it anymore. Then, she shouted loudly:
"Disqualified!"

"What?" I looked up from the book.

"Flo is already so troubled! Darke actually didn't explain anything, he's not qualified to be a master!"

Lilith protested furiously. It's rare that she would get so agitated.

"Darke is really strange recently. He's probably obsessed with his new tools, forgetting about the ones that he owned."

Lilith stared at me as though she's asking for my opinion.

I believe in Darke, and don't agree with her. So I rebuked her a bit.

"There's no such thing. See, it says so right here." I flipped through the pages, "The Demon God glanced at the white ring. However, he didn't say anything— that's the proof that Darke noticed Flo's troubles."

"Then why didn't he say anything?" Lilith bit her lips in disagreement.

"It's because Darke is worried of her. Darke respected Flo's feelings and honor, so he's just watching over her."

"Hmm…… But I don't think so……"

Lilith seems to think for Flo a lot recently. That's why my thoughts differ from hers because I believe in Darke.

Volkov did not speak. He silently gazed at Lilith without saying anything.

The start of the seventh volume is even worse.

How could this……!

I was taken aback as well.

After Flo Snow ran away from home, Darke did not look for her, but made a new ring with his magic!

"Satisfied, Darke lifted his new ring and observed it. It's a pristine white ring that gathered the beauty of all the silver in the world on a single point."

"Enough, enough enough enough!"

Lilith started to shout angrily like a mooing cow[1]

"I- I- Isn't that too stupid!? Why didn't Darke go look for Flo!? And he even made a new ring, the devil! Inhumane!"

"I- I- It's the same even if you tell meeeeee!"

Lilith caught hold of my neck and started to shake me. The clanking noise rang again in my skull.

“Darke must have some plaaaaaaaaaans!”

Though I said that, but I have no idea what Darke is thinking about this time.

Why would Darke make a new ring at this time? Fixing broken tools is is job, but he didn’t fix them this time, but made a new one. Also, he didn’t even try to search for Flo……

Not hiding her displeased feelings, Lilith continued to press me on: “Continue, continue!”

I felt anxious about the next part of the story as well, so I continued to read.

“At that time, Flo Snow who left home- reached- a- place- far- away…… from—”

At this moment, I stopped. “…… Iris?” “Mnn?” They emitted sounds of confusion at the same time.

—this is bad.

It’s pouring. Like a road with large amounts of traffic, the white lines interweaved on the words, preventing me from continuing to read.

I calmly adjusted my focus of my pupil settings. However, the reason of the situation is not because my vision is unfocused, but that my vision is blocked, so I cannot se anything at all.

“Hey, Iris, what’s with you?” Lilith used her fingers to lightly touch my arm.

“No…… I’m okay.”

I focused my attention on the book again.

The situation improved. The flow decreased.

“At that time, Flo Snow who left home reached a place far away from the castle of the demon god, near the river of the demon world. Usually, it would be the time that she’s talking to Darke at home……”

The rain was still pouring.

The monochrome view that was like an old movie was cut into a few parts.

I didn’t mention the rain to anyone.

Not to Lilith, not to Volkov.

I like the small book club meeting.

Liking the Lilith who urges me to continue reading with her eyes sparkling.

Liking the Volkov who’s listening silently with anticipation written on his face.

I like the time that flows gently and silently like this very much.

“Alone, Flo felt so lonely that she wanted to cry. The memories that surfaced in her mind were all about Darke……”

In the splattering rain, I continued to read.

The rain probably wouldn’t stop now.

I would probably lose my sight in the near future.

Then, God, I wish to you. This is a prayer that I bet my life on.

Just give me a little more time.

Please don’t take my vision before the gentle book club meetings end.

Note

1. ↑ In Japanese, enough= mou, similar to mooing sound.

Day Seventy-Eight

It's a rainy day as usual. A rainy day that definitely wouldn't end.

I'm moving the waste materials today as well.

At the coastline that extends from the piled up waste materials at the 'gut', the waste that were stacked up like a hill has decreased a lot. This would signify that our job is coming to an end.

The clanking noise of the metal in my skull was like the irregular dance moves of a person dancing on the stage that is my mind.

I couldn't help but feel like cracking open my skull, taking it out. However, using my arms to do this type of delicate work makes me uneasy. Besides, opening it would be simple, but closing it would be troublesome.

While thinking to myself, I saw a rare scene in the afternoon when I was repeating the dull labor.

It was the scene of the inspector apologizing.

On the monitoring station, the inspector that usually stays at the top was actually bowing, an appeasing smile on his face. After looking in detail, I found that a middle-aged man of medium build who's wearing a suit was standing beside the inspector, pointing here and there.

—he's probably a VIP. He might even be the general manager here.

I glanced over there while I moved the waste materials. The man on the monitoring station pointed at us quite a few times. Each time, the inspector would hurriedly jot down notes. I wonder what they're talking about.

I shifted my attention to my front, and stopped behind Volkov's large back. Lilith was at his side.

I increased the speed of my continuous track, going forward to ask them.

The clanking metal noise rang joyfully in my skull while I continued to go forward in the rain.

♠

“Don’t you feel that it’s strange?”

The person who said that was Lilith.

Late night at two, we were having a book club meeting at the old wooden table in the warehouse, as usual.

“What’s so strange?”

“Iris, didn’t you see it too? The fat man.”

Probably obtained from the waste materials, Lilith stared at me while swinging the small recorder in her hands. Her elegant, beautiful face showed a dissatisfied expression, while her brows were furrowed.

“Ah, do you mean the man wearing a suit speaking to the inspector?”

“That’s right, that’s right. He’s probably one of the people from the ‘headquarters’ that came here before, right?”

“Headquarters……? Headquarters from where?”

“The headquarters of this company. Isn’t there a red logo on the inspector’s uniform? …… It’s a pity I couldn’t read the words on it.”

“A red logo……”

I can’t differentiate colors, so I don’t remember this.

“The car that they were on had the same logo as well, so they’re probably sent here from the headquarters in Oval.”

After hearing the word ‘Oval’, my heard started to pound. That’s the name of the city that Professor and I lived in.

“Is Oval…… near here?”

“Eh? Do you mean Oval City?”

I nodded, then Lilith answered: “It’s just beside here. You wouldn’t even need fifteen minutes to reach it on car.”

“Fifteen minutes……”

I bated my breath because of this answer. Fifteen minutes on car. After arriving here, I felt as if I was thousands of miles away from my hometown, and was at foreign soil, but never would I have thought that the this place is so close to Oval City.

At this moment, Lilith continued the topic just now.

“That’s right. I heard some strange news today. Those were the words that the inspector spoke of after the VIP from the headquarters left.”

After that, Lilith lowered her voice. Actually, only robots with their power sources turned off were in the warehouse even if she didn’t do that.

“After the job is finished, these people are going to get fired.”

“……? What does that mean?”

“That~ would~ mean~ fired, fired! After the work is done, we’ll become scrap metal!”

“Uuu…….!”

I couldn’t help but moan. After hearing the word ‘scrap metal’, I recalled what occurred ‘that day’. The day when my limbs were torn off. I don’t want to go through that all over again.

“…… What do you think?”

Unusually, Lilith asked Volkov for his opinion, while he answered immediately.

“Robots- must- obey- humans.”

Unsatisfied, Lilith hammered on Volkov’s arm.

“Seriously…… Did you think clearly about this? Don’t you know that we’ll become scrap metal if this continues?”

“Robots- must- obey- humans.” Volkov repeated the same answer.

“That’s enough, I’m the dumb one for asking you about this.”

Lilith leaned her back against the junk behind her.

“I definitely don’t want to turn out like that.”

I gazed at Lilith: “But we can’t do anything about that.”

“Isn’t everything solved if we just run away?”

“But there’s a forced command code in our body.”

“That wouldn’t matter. I removed it a long time ago anyways.”

“…… Eh?”

I was taken aback. The forced command code is an important component in the safety circuit of a robot’s body. That is a program that is forbidden to be removed so that robots would definitely be unable to disobey humans.

“My safety circuit broke down. Probably at the forth construction site before this? It was coincidentally broken when I was squashed by a crane before this. However, I can’t charge if I don’t work, so I kept pretending to obey the humans.”

“Is that a joke…… Then is it the same with Volkov?”

I glanced at him. He answered in his deep voice as usual: “No.”

“Volkov’s- safety circuit- still- same.”

“It’s because this guy was a military robot.”

Lilith looked at Volkov while saying.

“His safety circuit is quite unusual. I tried to remove his safety circuit before this, but it ended in failure. …… It was still successful in the process, but there’s a strange black setting in the way…… ”

Volkov said with his head held high: “Volkov- safe.” Lilith answered uncaringly: “Yes yes, very safe.”

“But this isn’t the time for us to say these things calmly.”

Lilith stared at Volkov directly.

“Is it really okay if you become scrap metal?”

“Robots- must- obey- humans.”

“Right……”

Lilith sighed. She looked really troubled. Though she seldom shows this attitude, she indeed cares for Volkov.

“…… Never mind, compared with this, it’s better if I remove your security circuit right now, Iris. If anything happens, even if they pressed the ‘emergency stop button’, you can still escape.”

The emergency stop button is a button used for emergencies for the robots to stop moving together. I saw one of those hung on the belt of the inspector.

“Remove? Is that possible?”

“Of course. I was in charge of the emergency repair of my colleagues at a construction site before this. …… though it’s just instantaneous.”

Lilith took out a toolkit from below the table. Of course, it’s another ‘war spoil’ from the construction site.

“Don’t move. The mental circuit is especially fragile.” She moved behind me, coming closer to me with a screwdriver in her hands.

“I- is it really going to be okay?”

“It’ll be alright! …… Probably.”

A creaking noise came from the top of m y head, Lilith had started to loosen the screws. One tiny screw after another were placed on the square box on top of the table.

Finally, with a clang, the top of my head was opened.

“Oh? It’s the substandard goods from the third factory. …… So that’s how things are.”

Lilith started to nod, making sounds of agreement.

“What do you understand?”

“I understood how you came to be here. From that junk parts store.”

“Junk parts store?”

“Aren’t new robots expensive? That’s why the junk parts stores that collect second hand parts like hands or legs, making ‘homemade’ robots are increasing.”

I’ve heard about this. Those places would collect second hand parts and modify them, assembling an illegal modified robot— such as myself.

“You’re probably bought by the inspector from the junk parts store at Oval City. But actually, the Robots Management Department sold them to them, right?”

I thought that she’s right. Thus, I explained the process of myself arriving at the construction site after being turned into scrap metal.”

“Are you joking……” Just at that moment, Lilith made an odd noise.

“What is it?”

“Wow, it’s the first time I saw such a small mental circuit…..”

Looking at my internal parts, Lilith said in awe. “Wow! The safety circuit is so small! And it’s a unique structure!?” Lilith seems very excited. I couldn’t help but get embarrassed.

Lilith’s expression turned solemn. She observed my face from the side, her long hair gently brushing past my shoulder.

“You, who are you?”

“…… What?” I tilted my head.

“The parts of your body are all quite old, but your mental circuit are quite advanced. What is with this?”

“That’s because……”

A shadow was cast in my mind. Those were the sorrowful memories that I sealed in the depths of my heart, the past that I don’t want to face.

“Ah, what’s this?” Lilith said in surprise.

“What is it now?”

“There seems to be a locked object hung near your mental circuit.”

“Lock?”

I suddenly remembered something. ‘That noise’ that kept clanking in my skull recently.

“Wait a minute……”

Lilith took out a metal wire out of the toolkit and twisted it into a hook— like the hooks on fishing rods.

“I’ll get it out for you right away.”

After a moment, a click echoed, then she said “It’s done”. It seems that the hook found its prey.

“What is this…… A pendant?” Lilith muttered in surprise while holding the metal wire.

“Eh?”

I turned my head over, only to hear Liltith say “Look”, placing the object she found on the table.

It’s a gray oval-shaped pendant with a lock on it.

No, it’s not gray, actually a silver radiance shone from the—

Circlet cigarette case.

“Ah……”

I slowly extended my right hand, holding the cigarette case.

Stains of dried blood were still caked on the cigarette case dirtied by black machine oil.

With trembling hands, I opened the cigarette case, then a familiar 8-shaped circlet cigarette rolled onto the table, falling down silently like a bicycle that lost its rider.

“Ahhh……”

‘That photo’ was stuck onto the lid of the cigarette case as well.

A young girl wearing a frilled dress and a straw hat was standing in front of the signboard of a movie. Beside her, it was the tall person wearing a shirt and a pair of jeans with a mischievous smile on her face, she is—

“Pro…… fessor……”

My right arm holding the cigarette case started to tremble slightly. The trembling soon spread to the whole of my body. The emotions that I had been suppressing, the restrained pain, love and deep despair broke out of the cage at the depths of my heart, surging violently out of my body. The Professor in the photo extended her hands to me, bringing me back to the happy times of the past. “I’m back, Iris. Have you been a good girl today as well?” the Professor patting my head gently, but somewhat harshly as well. “Mnn., it’s really good. Iris is really good at cooking.” The Professor praising me. “Ah, Miss Iris, do you have anything to say about this?” The Professor bullying me. “Erm, Iris?” The troubled Professor. “Good night, Iris.” The gentle Professor. However, Professor is now dead. I can’t see Professor anymore. Professor, Professor, ahhhh, ProfessorProfessor ProfessorProfessor ProfessorProfessor ProfessorProfessor—

“Uu- aa…… UWAAAAAA—!”

I started to wail. I lied on the table in violent convulsions, making sounds of despair that frightened even myself. The happy moments and gentle memories shattered like glass, piercing into the tenderest part of my heart. The emotions that flooded out of my heart turned into a large wave, drowning myself in it.

“Iris!” At that moment, Lilith’s high-pitched shout pierced into my back. Her arms forcefully hugged my body that was in convulsions.

“It’s okay, everything’s going to be alright……!”

“Ah, ahhh—”

I caught hold of Lilith’s elbows, restraining my emotions. While drowning in the sea of pain and sorrow, I frantically waited for the moment to pass.

“It’s okay…… It’s alright now, Iris……”

Like a mother comforting a weeping child, Lilith kept encouraging me. The body that I felt on my back was very soft and warm, reminding me of the times when Professor hugged me before this.

My trembling gradually stopped.

Time flowed again.

My convulsions stopped, only my hands were trembling slightly.

Looking worried, Lilith held my hand soundlessly. Volkov gazed at us silently as well.

"…… Have you calmed down?"

Lilith asked in a gentle voice. I answered weakly "Yes……"

After that, she looked at the cigarette case and myself in turn, asking hesitantly: "What is this?"

I nodded slightly, then raised my head to look at them.

Lilith's large eyes that reflected my silhouette were filled with worry as well.

Volkov's square eyes emitted a steady glow, he's waiting for me to speak as well.

— That's right, tell these two……

I decided to tell them the truth. Telling them wouldn't matter— instead of saying that, it's better if I say that I wish for them to know.

Thus, details poured out of my mouth like water bursting out from a dam. I spoke of being created by the famous Professor Umbrella, the death of Professor because of an accident, of myself attempting suicide because of despair but failed, of the people from the Robots Management Department appearing before me, of myself turning into scrap metal, and of myself arriving here after I woke up.

I pointed at the photo with my right hand: "This is Professor…… This is me." At the same time, I heard Lilith gulp. Volkov's body was rather rigid as well.

After about ten minutes, I stopped. Silence returned to the warehouse.

In the cigarette case on the table, Professor and I were smiling. Professor wore a teasing expression, while I was rather angry.

"Is that so……" Lilith gazed at the photo in the cigarette case, muttering lightly, "I felt that something was odd. Iris felt like a girl's name to me……"

Then, she blinked, raising her head as though she came to a conclusion.

“Actually, it’s the same for me.”

She stared directly at me.

“I lived at a human’s house before this as well.”

After that, she started to speak of her past.

Five years ago, Lilith was bought by the prestigious ‘Sunlight’ family. As the Sunlight family do not have any children, they adopted a young robot model instead.

At first, Lilith lived a happy life there, accepting her the love of her ‘parents’. They would buy clothes for her, play with her, treating her like their own flesh and blood. The rich array of expression that she owned was the proof that her parents spent a lot on her.

The situation changed two years after Lilith arrived. Her parents had a new child. While Lilith was happy for the birth of her younger sister at first, things weren’t that simple.

Lilith’s parents abandoned her.

The incident happened all of a sudden. One day, the robot recycling vendors came to her house without a sign, almost dragging her out of the house. Her parents didn’t even look at her departure.

After that, she was sold again as ‘second-hand stock’. She was a waiter at a restaurant at first, and was then moved to a construction company, arriving at this construction site. Though she looks fragile, both her battery capacity and load weight are immense, which is why she could persist until now.

She spoke of her sad past as if it doesn’t concern her. Lastly, she told me that I’m the first person to know about this apart from Volkov.

“This person is the same as well.”

After saying that, Lilith turned around to face Volkov and asked: “Can I tell Iris?”
Volkov nodded silently.

“Do you remember Volkov’s full name?”

“Isn’t it Volkov Galosh?”

Lilith nodded, then continued: “Actually, it’s Volkov Galosh Ouroboros.”

“Ouroboros?”

“That’s right, Ouroboros. That’s originally the name of a snake that appeared in myths. …… And then, when Volkov was in the army, he belonged to a unit called Ouroboros.”

‘Volkov- knows- ways- to- kill’ The words resounded in my mind.

“The unit called Ouroboros was a unit that was formed of robots, a Mech…… Err, what’s it again?”

Lilith glanced at Volkov, while he answered shortly: “Mech Corp.”

“Right, in the Mech Corp, they were dispatched to various battlefields. However, they suddenly received an order to return when they were going to their twenty eighth battlefield.”

“Why?”

“Because a newer model of robot weapon was invented. To dispatch the new weapons, the ‘older models’ like Volkov fell into disuse.”

Actually, I think I heard about this on the news before this.

“But why is a military robot being used in a construction site?”

“It seems that the company has relations with military affairs as well. Though the background is complicated, the company is only working on subcontract projects. …… Also, most people don’t know it, but the management of military robots is actually quite lax.”

“Lax?”

“Apart from Volkov, many robots that were originally used for military uses were sold in the market. They were all older robots that were left because of the decrease of wars.”

“So that’s how things are……”

“Pitiless, aren’t they. Creating them when they need it, abandoning them when they don’t.”

Lilith shrugged while saying. I didn’t know what to say.

After that, she picked up the cigarette case and said while looking at the photo.

“Even so…… Your situation is better.”

“Better?”

“Because, didn’t your Professor love you till the end?”

“But……”

Now that Professor is not here, saying things like this is meaningless— I wanted to answer that, but stopped.

Lilith was abandoned by her parents. Volkov was abandoned by the army.

Professor— didn’t abandon me.

“That’s right, much better.” Lilith kept staring at the photo, mumbling absent-mindedly, “Up till the last moment, you were loved……”

I only understood at that moment. The reason that Lilith kept standing up for the magic ring Flo Snow.

After the new ring appeared, the old ring would lose its home.

The ring represents Lilith, and also Volkov.

Day Eighty-Three

Today started like any other day.

Waking up because of the inspector’s knocks in the morning, we crawled out of the warehouse like ants lining up to work on our unchanging, mundane work.

The incident happened in the afternoon. When the siren that signals the end of the lunch break, Lilith and I were about to stop our conversation.

“Iris.”

Lilith’s gaze suddenly sharpened.

“What is it?”

“Look at that.”

She signaled with her narrowed eyes.

—Ah……

Following Lilith’s gaze, I looked at the monitoring station, seeing ‘that man’ standing there. He’s the ‘VIP from the headquarters’ who was giving orders to the inspector that day. He was holding a phone.

“What’s he talking about?”

“Who knows……”

After the man ended his phone call.

Sound of a noisy exhaust engine rang in the construction site. After looking in detail, I saw a car much larger than the truck used for moving the waste materials parked at the slope in front of the construction site— at the ‘intestines’. A strange atmosphere surrounded the black car, its sturdy shape reminding people of the armored cars of the police.

“Stop!”

The roar of the inspector rang, and the hundred over robots stopped their movements at the same time.

“Now, people who have their names called, gather at the ‘instestine’! Numbers Two, Six, Seven, Nine……”

As though he was reading an admission list, the inspector read out the numbers in turn.

“Thirteen, Sixteen, Seventeen……”

Number Fifteen, Volkov, was skipped.

“What’s happening……?”

I looked at Lilith, while she shook her head. After that, Lilith’s ‘number Thirty-Eight’ was skipped as well.

I calmly observed the sudden incident. “Ninety-Six, Hundred and Two, Hundred and Five, Hundred and Eleven……” My identification number ‘Hundred and Eight’ was skipped as well. I don’t know what that signifies.

“Hundred and Fifteen, Hundred and Eighteen. …… That’s all! Those that had their names called gather immediately! No dawdling!”

The total number of robots called was forty one, almost a third of the robots present.

In less than five minutes, forty one robots lined up in front of the large car. It looks just like a queue in front of a popular shop.

“Alright, let’s start!”

The inspector shouted, then the door of the black car was opened. After the door was raised, the huge ‘roller’ spun in it while making a banging noise. The scene reminded me of the garbage collection cars moving in the city. It’s just that the car in front of us was a few times larger than that.

The first one to be called was number Two. The four legged robot was like a striding horse, moving his body in pace to the front of the inspector.

“Get in.”

After he finished saying that, the inspector pointed at the car behind him with his thumb. The metal jaw that was making banging noises and spinning non-stop was waiting for him. For an instant, number Two looked like he doesn’t know what to do, silently staring at the inspector.

“Hurry up! This is an order!”

Hearing his angry shouts, number Two’s body froze as though it was struck by lightning. After that, his four legs walked unnaturally to the roller.

“…… Are you kidding.”

I couldn't help but say so, and number Two took his first step towards the roller at this moment.

Just at that moment.

The creaking noise of the metals in contact rang, and the front leg of number Two was cut off by the blades on the roller. After that, his front leg was cut to pieces and sucked into the car. Like a pressure processed metal board, his upper body was slowly flattened. The cruel steel jaw made a creaking noise, biting him into pieces.

In shock, I stared at the death sentence that had no prior notice. Everyone stood still.

Finally, number Two's upper body was swallowed by the roller, while he looked like he was standing upside down, his hind legs pointing upwards. Then, his hind legs made a creaking noise as well, the sound that was like someone chewing gravel was compressed, a few screws and nuts sprang out, as though they were being swallowed by a black devil. Less than ten seconds passed from the moment that number Two took his first step forward until his body disappeared completely. But in my eyes, it was like the scene played in slow motion.

Number Two and I never spoke to each other.

Even so, I saw him going around these three months, that's why at least I know that 'his' identification number is number Two among the hundred over robots. He is a four-legged type, old mass-produced type, model HRP006.

He had completely vanished. We cannot meet ever again. The pitiful fear caused my body to start trembling.

"Next up, number Six!"

When the inspector shouted, number Six's body shuddered.

I know number Six as well. He's a continuous track type like me, headless, but he has visual settings similar to a telescope installed around his chest, a labor type robot with a rather old model. Our only point of intersection was the one time when he accidentally tripped on a pile of mud, bumping into me. That time, he reflexively said 'sorry' to me, and his electronic voice was rather similar to me.

The only time when our paths crossed was that time.

However, even though our relationship ends thus—

“Enter! This is an order!”

Number Six extended his arms as though he was presenting a tribute. At the instant when his fingertips touched the roller, his whole arm was whirled inside at once, crushed in the metallic banging and creaking noises. When his arm was reeled inside up till his shoulder, his body sprung up like number Two just now, his leaning posture whirling his continuous track into the car as well. Not long after that, small parts were thrown out of the car as though it was spitting out seeds when eating fruits.

After about five seconds, number Six vanished.

“Next, number Seven!”

The death sentence continues. Though they didn’t say that, we know that this is the process of turning the inefficient old robots into scrap metal. The four legged number two, the continuous track type number Six, and number Seven who’s just called, they weren’t doing so well recently. Their movements were slow, and they would drop the waste materials as well, so they often got yelled at by the inspector.

“Next, number Nine!”

The black devil roared loudly, continuously swallowing the robots. It mercilessly crushed their limbs and bodies, and would sometimes spit out fragments of them. Scraps of ‘food’ were accumulated at the bottom of the car.

The pitiful death sentence continued until the last robot was left.

“What is it! Hurry up and enter!”

The last robot, number Hundred and Eighteen stood in front of the car. He was even later than me to arrive at the construction site, a very slow two-legged type, he would walk around with limbs like a sick person. Even if he was lightly touched by the other robots, he would fall down on the floor. However, that’s not his fault, and is obviously because of his lack of maintenance before this.

“Oi, number Hundred and Eighteen! What’s with you! This is an order!”

Hearing the inspector’s impatient voice, number Hundred and Eighteen’s body shook violently.

After that, his whole body convulsed, squatting down while hugging his head with his slender arms.

“Hey, what are you doing! Stand up, number Hundred and Eighteen! This is an ord—”

At that moment.

Number Hundred and Eighteen sprang up like a rubber ball and started to run away rapidly.

“What……!”

The inspector was dumbstruck. According to what I know, he’s the first robot who dared to ignore orders and run away in public. Probably because his safety circuit malfunctioned, number Hundred and Eighteen rebelled against the humans and ran unsteadily but quickly away from us. He ran down the slope for his freedom.

However, the inspector did not chase him, and did not order the other robots to chase him as well. That’s because number Hundred and Eighteen had already clambered up the steel fence surrounding the construction site.

—Ahh, that side wouldn’t work!

Number Hundred and Eighteen climbed up the five meter high wire gauze. At the instant when his hand touched the spiked steel fence, sparks flew and white smoke was emitted, then number Hundred and Eighteen fell down from the top of the wire fence. A high-voltage current assaulted his body.

Falling onto the ground, he cursed while frantically rising up. However, his body trembled as though he was paralyzed, obviously because his internal circuits short-circuited, causing his body to be unable to move well.

Finally, a robot tied him up at the inspector’s orders. Then, the robot carried him like he was carrying the waste material, silently bringing him back. This is a scene that repeated thousands of times. The only thing that’s different in this scene is that number Hundred and Eighteen who’s being carrying here was crying out ‘No, no, I don’t want to die!’.

Seeing his expression, I couldn’t help but think of the crazy suicidal actions that I attempted at the research lab in the Umbrella residence. The overwhelming fear and restlessness that assaults a person at the moment when he faces death. “No, I don’t want to die!”— that’s a strong wish for survival.

“E- erm!”

When I came back to my senses, I shouted out loud. I, myself, wasn't sure if I wanted to save number Hundred and Eighteen at all. It's just that I couldn't help but cry out loud after seeing him wailing.

Even so—

As I was about to move my continuous track and go forward, someone grabbed me from behind with surprising strength, roughly pulling me down.

— Eh?

I raised my head, only to see Lilith standing in front of me. She raised her brows with her eyes round, and was wearing a scary expression that I haven't seen before, saying in a sharp voice: "Don't move!" Being overturned, I stare at her blankly. A sad expression appeared on her face quickly, and she added in a trembling voice: "I beg of you, just stay silent for now……" After that, I didn't speak again.

Number Hundred and Eighteen was brought to the front of the car, and was dumped into it. The metal executor widened its maws, slowly chewing the lower part of Hundred and Eighteen's body as though it was tasting a delicacy. During the process, the dying screams echoed through the whole construction site, piercing through people's eardrums. Finally, number Hundred and Eighteen still died.

After the devil that swallowed the forty one robots left, only a large amount of debris was left.

After that, the inspector ordered us to continue our work. Our first job was to clean up the innards and flesh of our colleagues.

We silently worked. Lilith and Volkov silently bent down, picking up the remains of our colleagues that stank of machine oil.

I picked up the visual lens of number Hundred and Eighteen. The lens suddenly turned into dust soundlessly, disappearing in the wind.

That night, we decided to escape.

Chapter 3 - Execution

“It’s so great to have met you.” (Volkov Galosh)

The Previous Night

“Our plan has been confirmed.”

Late night at two, beside the round table as usual, Lilith said in a low, determined tone.

These two days, we’ve been having tactical meetings at night.

The topic is our escape plan.

“Are we…… really doing it tomorrow?”

The ‘death sentence’ happened yesterday afternoon, while we decided to escape last night. Planning our flight on tomorrow might be a bit too hurried.

Lilith said.

“We can’t dawdle anymore. …… Because, who knows when ‘next time’ would be?”

“That isn’t wrong……”

But an inexplicable uneasiness still lingered in my heart.

“Did the car appear before this?”

“I don’t know.” Lilith shook her head slightly, “I saw it for the first time yesterday. …… Isn’t it the same for you, Volkov?”

Lilith turned her head over, while Volkov silently nodded.

I asked again.

“Why didn’t they choose to do maintenance? They really don’t need to dismantle them straightaway……”

“Costs, costs. Compared with the costs of doing maintenance, buying a new one at a second hand shop would be cheaper.”

Lilith gave us a simple, understandable answer. I could only answer weakly: “……. I see.”

“Anyways—” Lilith repeated her words, “We can’t dawdle anymore.”

Just at that moment, Lilith glued her eyes to me for a moment, then glanced at Volkov.

— Ah, so that’s how it is.

She’s doing this for Volkov and I.

I, who was made from junk parts, and Volkov, who has slow responses. If we’re going to have a second ‘death sentence’, the ones who would be in the most danger would unquestionably be us. Lilith is not considering her own safety, but rather, she doesn’t want us to face danger.

“About tomorrow’s escape plan—”

Lilith turned the topic back to its original point.

“According to our discussions yesterday, escaping would require a ‘route’ and ‘timing’, these two conditions. …… First, it’s the escape route.”

Lilith picked up the junk on the ground, then placed a bent metal board and some screws onto the table.

“This is the construction site. This side is the ‘gut’, while that side is the ‘intestines’.

Lilith moved her fingers, making a simple schematic diagram of the construction site.

“There’s a high-voltage current at the top of the surrounding wire fence, so this route wouldn’t do. Thus, there are only two escape routes. The first one is to go through the ‘gut’, escaping along the coastline; the other is to go through the ‘intestines’, escaping to the main land. I think you know this, but escaping through the gut is too dangerous, there aren’t any shelters along the coastline, so we’d be shot by the laser guns very quickly.”

Lilith made a gun with her fingers, pointing it to her temple.

“Thus, we must choose the ‘intestines’ route to escape. The method that we would do this is to steal the truck used to move materials, then escaping into the city, blending into the ordinary vehicles.”

“Wait a minute. Who’s going to drive the stolen truck?”

“Isn’t that obvious, it’s me.”

“Eh? Lilith can drive?”

“I was a driver at a construction site before this. I even drove an excavator and a crane.”

“Lilith- no- license.”

“Volkov, shut up.”

After giving the interrupting Volkov a scolding, Lilith continued her explanation.

“These are the steps……”

Lilith explained the steps for our escape plan in turn. My eyes turned round because of her idea. That is a daring plan that a normal robot would never dream of, a plan that would mock the humans.

However, I still have a question regarding Lilith’s plan.

“Can’t……. everyone run away together?”

“Huh?” Lilith blinked in surprise.

“What I meant was, since we’re escaping, why don’t everyone—”

“That’s impossible.”

Lilith immediately shook her head.

“Why?”

“Don’t you know that there’s eighty over robots here? No matter how you take it, there’s too much. Also, I think they won’t listen to our instructions.”

Lilith coldly said.

She said that according to her experience, an escape plan would only succeed if a small number of people take part in it, and there were no prior cases of large numbers of robots successfully running away together.

However, I still hesitated because of the need of abandoning the other robots. Probably it's because I had some feelings for them as we stayed in the same place for these three months. The more important thing is, the merciless death sentence kept lingering in my mind.

After that, I thought about Professor, thinking about the Professor who would always help robots at the roadside. That's right, if it's Professor, she would—

Thus, I expressed my opinions.

"Lilith."

"What is it?"

"At least we can do this, right?"

My suggestion was actually a 'compromise'. After listening to my suggestion, Lilith moaned with a troubled expression on her face.

It's because my suggestion is too childish.

The Day

Two days after the 'death sentence' happened, and the eighty fifth day that I arrived at the construction site.

Late night.

At the instant when the last truck that moves the waste materials appears at the construction site.

“Robots!”

Lilith shouted loudly. A small microphone was in her hands.

“Listen closely!”

Her voice resounded in the construction site. It’s because I stealthily set up speakers on the back of a few other robots (Of course, other ‘spoils’ that we got from the waste materials.).

Besides that, we have another trick on our sleeves.

“From now on— everyone— leave— this place—!”

Lilith gave her order— the ‘inspector*s voice that rang from the recorder.*

The familiar words that we’ve heard every morning rang.

“This is an order—”

The effect was instantaneous.

Speaking the order with the inspector’s voice caused the robots to run round the place.

Everyone ran on the muddy ground, some ran towards the gut, while some ran towards the intestines.

The sudden escapade caused the inspector to panic.

“What are you doing! Stop! Everyone stop! This is an order!”

Thus, the escaping robots stopped their movements like they’re playing a game.

However, we’ve expected this to happen.

“From now on— everyone— leave— this place—! This is an order—!”

The table was turned. Receiving the new order, the robots ran hither and thither as though they were released from a curse. The scene sank into confusion once more.

Lilith's initial plan was to use the other robots as 'bait'. We would replay the inspector's edited orders, while the three of us would run away in the confusion.

I added— "Then let's just remove all of their safety circuits so that they could run away."

The removing process was quite simple. Since the safety circuits of the robots were cheap stock from a discount store, we just needed to forcefully pull them off. Thus, we removed the safety circuits of eighty over robots yesterday. Though Lilith was mumbling 'We're actually doing this……', she still helped out a lot.

That's how our plan turned to 'Robot Escapade'.

"Emergency stop! Emergency stop!"

The blaring sirens rang, and I saw the inspector frantically pressing the emergency stop button hung on his belt. However, that did not have any effect on the robots that lost their safety circuits.

Up till now, everything happened according to our plan.

In the confusion, only Volkov maintained the posture of moving the waste materials, not moving. His knees were bent slightly, looking like a statue. Lilith couldn't remove his safety circuit, so the emergency stop button still affected him.

"Right— move— number Fifteen- here!"

Lilith played the recording, ordering the robots nearby. Though the robots who had their safety circuits removed do not have to follow the orders, they still gathered around Volkov because of the overwhelming fear that formed because of following orders all year long.

Four robots carried the paralyzed Volkov. Though Volkov was large, the robots that were already used to moving waste materials easily moved his huge body to the back of the truck.

"Eek!" The driver of the truck ran away in a flash. Lilith turned the key on the car, starting the engine. It seems that the most crucial part of the plan— getting the car has succeeded.

"From now on— everyone— leave— this place—!"

Lilith played the recording again, while the robots who moved Volkov moved away like children who realized that they were tricked. Some of them waved and shouted “Bye!” “You guys are great!”

“Good- good bye! I hope that all would be well for you……”

I waved my arms with all my might, bidding farewell to them. We probably wouldn’t be able to see them again— I had that feeling in my heart.

The resounding sirens, the escaping robots, the angry shouts of the inspector, the fake orders of the inspector that echoed all round the place— the construction site reached its maximum confusion at late night.

“Iris! We’re going!”

Lilith’s shouts came from the driver’s seat. The sound of the engine pressed me on like the whinnying of horses.

“Ah, wa- wait!”

I hurriedly moved towards the truck.

“Alright, catch hold of me!”

Lilith extended her arms. After using much force, Lilith pulled myself, who was unable to get onto the car successfully with my continuous track, onto the truck. It was at these moment that I experienced myself her overwhelming strength.

“Let’s go!”

As though we weren’t actually riding a truck, Lilith shouted happily.

She stepped on the accelerator, then the engine roared. The escaping car finally went on its road with three fugitives on it.

battery=04:50:36

The truck accelerated. I glanced at the conveyer belt area of the ‘intestines’ area, then the waste materials on it scattered on the ground due to the collision with the car.

The first barrier is the guardhouse at the exit of the construction site.

“The truck over there, stop!”

The speaker barked out an order for us to stop. The automatic gate descended, and cone-shaped road blocks blocked us.

“People who are in our way will be squashed into pancakes!”

Lilith said her over-enthusiastic words, did not stop, but accelerated the truck instead.

“Uwaa, whoa! We’re hitting them!”

We collided at the moment when I shouted. Quite a few road barriers were rammed away, the wooden pole of the lever snapped as well, and that was how the truck directly went past the first barrier.

“Hmph, piece of cake!” Lilith said. Holding the steering wheel, a radiant glow was glimmering in her eyes, and a scary smile as though she changed into another person surfaced on her lips. Sitting beside her, I could only shout ‘Ah, uwaaaa…….”, frantically putting on the safety belt. The truck rocked violently, I’ve already bumped into the top of the car three times.

The truck ran on the gravel road like a mad horse that lost its reins, arriving quickly at a normal road.

“Lilith!”

“What is it!”

“Would everyone be able to run away safely?”

“Who knows! But we’ve done everything that we could! The rest would be their own responsibility! …… That’s right, Iris!”

“What is it?”

“Do you think cars can fly?”

“…… What?”

“Second barrier!”

A signboard with ‘No Entry’ written on it was in front of us, and there was also a large, deep pit on the road. If we rush over there like this, we’d definitely fall into it.

“B- Brake!” I immediately hugged my head.

“We’ll lose if we stop!” Lilith continued to accelerate the car.

“Hey, Lilith!?”

At the instant when I shouted, the huge ‘no entry’ signboard collided with the truck, while the truck used the soil dug out from the pit as a springboard, flying onto the sky—then fell back onto the ground with a large bang.

“It’s done!”

Lilith shouted happily after perfectly flying past the pit. This really can’t be said as driving carelessly anymore.

“Iris, turn on the radio!”

“Didn’t bring it!”

“No, the radio on the car! Press that button!”

“I- is this it?”

“That’s the emergency warning light! Below that, that’s right, that one!”

I hurriedly pressed the button of the radio. White noise started to echo in the car.

“Choose a station!”

“Wait a minute!”

In the vigorously rocking truck, I changed the radio stations. However, all of them were playing music or songs, there weren't any stations informing us the traffic information.

"No traffic information!"

"No! I want music, music!"

"Eh? Music? Why?"

I asked in surprise, while Lilith continued to shout energetically.

"Of course it's to liven up the atmosphere!!"

After a few seconds, blaring rock music rang in the car. Following Lilith's instructions, I raised the volume to the max.

"E- Erm!" I shouted while covering my ears.

"What is it, Iris!?" Lilith shouted as well.

"Is this really okay!? Playing these rock music!"

"It's okay! These! Feels better! …… Look, the third barrier!"

A row of cars lined up in front of us. It seems that they were waiting for the green light — before I even had time to think about things, Lilith stepped on the accelerator again, rushing forward. The rock singer in the radio was screaming, and I wasn't sure what he's shouting about already.

"Step aside step aside step asiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiide!!"

Lilith smoothly turned the steering wheel, moving the truck to the right side of the rode. She wanted to move between the cars and the railings, but the space isn't enough for a truck to pass through.

"Master Lilith told you to get out of the way!!"

Lilith sounded the horn quite a few times. The drivers of the cars in front turned over in confusion, then fear immediately on their faces. These cars immediately sped away.

After that, Lilith rammed the right side of the truck with the railings while scraping away the rearview mirrors of the other cars at the left side, going past five cars waiting for the green lights in one go.

“Wait, Lilith, a junction!”

Unsurprisingly, a junction full of cars appeared before us.

However, the word ‘brake’ doesn’t exist in Lilith’s mind. She sounded the horn repeatedly as though she was playing with a toy, and continued to accelerate. The rock singer was singing in a chorus of ‘GO! GO! GO!’ as well.

The truck that suddenly went on a rampage at the junction caused the other cars to brake, screeching noises of friction rang all around, while we sped through the road like a bullet. Sounds of collision rang behind us, but I didn’t even feel like turning around to confirm it anymore.

While thinking that I’m still alive, unexpectedly, the rock singer was already happily singing a ballad in falsetto. Lilith happily hummed along with the song as well.

“I say, Lilith, isn’t it about time to slow down a bit……”

“Request denied!”

“Eh?”

“Behind you! The forth barrier!”

Through the windows, I looked behind us. Three cars with sirens on it were chasing us.

—the police!

battery=04:46:03

“The truck in front! Stop immediately!” The police car ordered, “Move the truck to the left and stop!”

“E- Erm, the police are behind us!” I shouted in a panic.

“Police!?” Lilith asked in an angry tone.

“They asked us to stop!”

“Then!?”

“Eh, well…… what should we do?”

“Of course we’ll have to shake them off our trail!”

Lilith continued to step on the accelerator.

The engine roared, and the truck that went past the speed limit rammed into the side of the road. The momentum pressed my body onto the left door.

“How is it!? How far are we!”

“Q- Quite far! But they’re chasing us again…… Ah!”

“What is it, Iris!”

“S- Something’s coming out!”

“Explain clearly!”

“Something small is coming out!”

Lilith poked her head out of the windows, shouting “Then what is it!”. Her hair fluttered in the wind like a living creature.

“Whoa, aren’t those ‘traffic robots’?”

A few robots chased us from the rear. Their upper torsos are humanoid, while there are four wheels at their lower torso— simply said, they’re robot cars. The sirens on top of their heads proves that they’re police cars as well.

“Traffic robots?”

“Police robots that govern the traffic! They’re followers of the police who chase cars that drive disregarding the speed limit.”

“Th- They’re getting closer!”

“I know!”

Lilith continued to step on the accelerator. However, the speed of the traffic robots are evidently much faster. The distance between us gradually shortened.

“The car over there, stop immediately. Or I will forcibly stop your car. The car over there……”

An electronic voice gave us a warning from the back. The voice was full of sternness.

“Lilith, th- they’re holding weapons!”

“What weapons!”

“Guns!”

“They’re planning to burst the tires, huh…… Iris!”

“What is it!”

“I order you to attack!”

“Ehhh!?”

“There’s probably a toolbox by your feet, right!”

I lowered my head to take a look, a toolbox was indeed under the seat. Lilith used it before when she was opening my skull.

“Pour the things inside onto the road!”

“Eh? Why?”

“Stop asking, just hurry!”

I don’t understand the reason for doing so, but since the traffic robots were starting to shoot, I don’t have any time to consider.

“Take that!”

I followed Lilith’s instructions, pouring the screws in the toolbox onto the road from the windows. A tinkling noise rang on the night road as the screws scattered on the ground.

At the next moment, a traffic robot tripped after stepping on a screw.

“More, more! Pour all of them out!”

“G- got it!”

I overturned the toobox, pouring out all of the things in it. The illegally thrown screws, nuts, nails, chains and so on rolled on the road with a clanking noise.

The effect was instantaneous. The traffic robots stepped on the parts one after another, then slipped on the road or sliding out of the road.

“This is…… oil?”

After having a close look, I saw stains of black oil in the toolbox. The reason that the traffic robots fell down so easily is probably because of this.

“How’s that? That’s called being prepared.” Lilith grinned happily, “Right~ Let’s just rush to a neighboring town—”

Just at that moment.

“Lilith, in front of you!”

I shouted. Lilith yelled “Blast……!”, then her face immediately fell.

Countless sirens were flaring at the road in front of us, quite a few large tanks that were larger than our truck blocked our road like a steel wall.

“This is bad!”

Lilith rapidly braked, but it was too late.

The tank shot out a ray of light, then our sights were immediately drowned in white light.

battery=04:21:29

“Uuu……”

When I came to my senses, I was thrown onto the cold asphalt road.

It was pouring. No, it’s just because the condition of my vision is terrible.

The truck is at the right side of my field of vision. The truck that had turned over, wheels spinning meaninglessly, and the fiercely burning trailer. In the darkness, the burning flames dyed the night sky white.

I searched in my memories.

Countless sharp lasers were released from the armored cars of the police, my vision turned white— so that’s why— I was shot by a laser gun.

I finally understood what had happened.

“Lilith!” I frantically called the name of my friend, “Lilith! Where are you!”

I supported myself on the road with my two hands, getting up and observed the surroundings. The ‘rain’ was still terrible, but my visual settings seemed to be okay. In the black and white vision, I tried to search for Lilith’s silhouette.

—Ah!

Below the railings at quite a distance from the overturned truck, I saw a silhouette. The long hair was spread on the ground like a fan.

“Lilith, are you okay!? Lilith!!”

I frantically shouted. However, Lilith lied weakly on the ground, motionless.

—Wait for me, Lilith. I’ll go save you right now.

I avoided the debris from the truck scattered all around, approaching Lilith by turning my continuous track.

Before I reached her side, Lilith made a pained moan, and regained her consciousness. She slowly lifted her upper body, looked around and met my gaze.

“Lilith, are you okay!”

“Mnn…… More or less. Compared with this, that guy—”

After she said that, Lilith turned her gaze to the truck.

“Don’t move!”

A rough shout suddenly rang, then Lilith was kicked in the back, bumping roughly with the road surface.

“Ahhh……!” After ascertaining her assailant, my body froze because of fear.

The person who kicked Lilith had an odd, metal helmet on him, and was equipped with armor, holding a laser gun that was giving off gray light in his hands as well.

Memories replayed in my mind like a slide show. The news in the afternoon, the fountain plaza, the robot that went on a rampage, the blue lasers, the special unit, and—

One of them raised the head of the robot like a trophy.

“Don’t move, this is an order!” The steel head said in a cold voice, “Place your hands at the back of your head!”

“You bastard……!” Lilith immediately retailiated. Her body sprang upwards like a whip, her back of her head ramming into the head of the man pressing her down. The man moaned, covering his face.

“Iris, we’re running away!”

“A- Alright!”

While being shocked at Lilith’s audacious actions to the police, I extended my right hand. Lilith extended her right hand to me as well.

At that instant, a light ray assaulted her.

Lilith’s right arm suddenly fell onto the ground in front of me.

She shouted in a high-pitched, screeching voice, and sat down on the ground weakly. Black machine oil poured out of the cut arm, even splattering myself. The man wearing heavy armor immediately rushed to Lilith's side, pointing at her with a laser gun.

"Being energetic sure is nice, missy!" The man who was hammered in the head by Lilith roughly grabbed her hair and pulled her up. Lilith moaned, her face twisted in pain.

"Because of you, one of my front teeth broke. …… Here's a gift in return."

Light engulfed her once more.

Lilith's left ear and left face was completely burnt. She gave a scream even more piercing than just now, collapsing on the road. While pressing on her left side of her face, Lilith convulsed in pain on the ground. Seeing this scene, the man started to laugh.

"Lilith! Turn off your pain sensors! Lili—"

I shouted with all my might, but a man immediately silenced me, kicking me aside.

"Let's just tear them apart so that it'll be easier to move them." "Yeah." While conversing, they pointed their laser guns at Lilith's head. Her face was full of terror when the men placed their fingers on the trigger. Seeing this scene, my body started to tremble slightly.

Ahhh, Lilith is dying, she's going to get killed. No, no, I definitely, absolutely, won't let this happen—!

"Uwaaaaa!"

Unknowingly, I rushed towards the men while shouting.

"What?" The man lost his balance soon. I frantically grabbed his legs. "Let go of me!" The man impatiently tried to fling me away, but I definitely wouldn't let go so easily.

"Iris!" Lilith shouted my name.

"Lilith, run away!" I answered loudly while being kicked by the man.

However, my resistance ended there.

My body was assaulted by 'something hot'. When I thought 'Ah……', I was collapsed on the surface on the road, looking at fragments of my continuous track descending from the sky.

“Uuu……” I moaned in a hoarse voice, looking at my lower body slowly. My lower torso was hit, and completely vanished. The parts below my waist was burnt, a few tubes poking out of it like innards, with sparks flying all around.

“Stop!” Lilith shouted in despair, “At least let her go!”

However, the men answered her pleadings with violence. The muzzle of the laser gun was roughly stuffed into Lilith’s mouth, and a choking sound came from her throat.

“Don’t worry. …… Both of you will turn into scrap metal together.”

—Lilith! Ahhh, Lilith!

I frantically taised my body, but I couldn’t do anything after being bathed in rays of lasers. I almost couldn’t even make a noise.

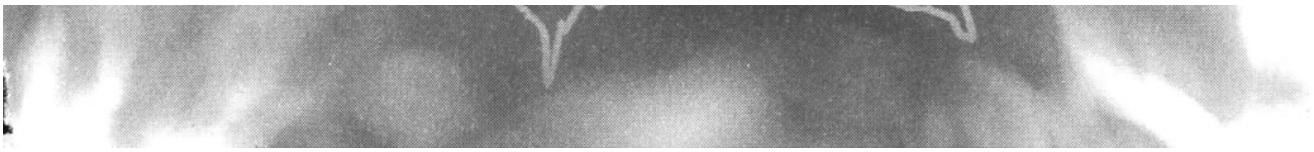
—Help!

I shouted in my heart, then used all my effort to shout out loud.

—Anyone, save Lilith!

Was my voice heard?

“—uaaaaaaa-arr-gggh!!”



I heard a sound. A powerful roar like the howling of an animal.

The men looked at each other, asking: “What was that?”

After that, “UUAAAAAARRRRRGGGGHH!!” the rough roar clearly tore the night apart. The men turned over to look at the direction where the sound came from. In their field of views, there was a large, burning truck.

After that, a large arm surrounded flames—

was extended from the truck.

battery=04:10:52

The ‘arm’ that was suddenly extended from the burning truck like a carnivore searching for prey tore apart the metal body of the truck, looking like oil being split apart. After the flaming arm is a flaming head, a flaming body and flaming legs— a flaming giant appeared while being surrounding in blazes.

“UUAAAAAARRRRRGGGHH!”

The giant roared to the night skies again. The surrounding air shook in response.

“Wha…… What is that!”

The men hastily raised their guns. The gun in Lilith’s mouth was pulled out as well.

Being thrown aside, Lilith moved her body weakly, mumbling quietly: “Vol…… Kov……?”

Volkov— ahh, is it really him— the eerie silhouette surrounded in flames moved slowly towards us.

A sharp glow was emitted by his square eyes, walking over here while making clanking noises. His arms were highly raised as though repelling the surrounding people, a furious glow in his eyes.

A man shouted: “Stop! This is an order!”

Even though he was pointed at by a laser gun, Volkov did not stop. Every time his powerful legs took a step, a pit would be formed on the surface of the asphalt road, while the stains that he walked past appeared in the night as oval flames.

“Stop! This is an order!”

The man commanded again, but the giant that was covered in flames did not have any intent of following their instructions. He came closer to us as though he couldn’t hear the orders. An overwhelming vigor glinted in his eyes— no, that is—

A murderous intent.

“Shoot!!”

At the instant when the order was give, the men pressed the trigger. Tens of light rays drew out a slightly arching line, speeding towards Volkov as though they were attracted there. The scene that I once saw in the news replayed in my mind.

However.

“What!?” The police were at a loss of words.

At the instant when the light rays reached Volkov’s body, the bright light dissipated like water splashed on a wall. The laser splashed towards the surrounding road, black smoke being given off in a crackling noise.

On the body of the giant that was bathed in laser beams, the paint melted like beads of sweat, black metal showing from below as though they were rubbed off by the night. “UUAAAARRRRGGGGHH!” He roared towards the night skies again, as though he was showing off his presence.

“U- Undead Mech Corp……!?” One of the police muttered in a trembling voice.

A second round of shooting got the same results. The laser beams that were shot were blocked by the heavy armor of the giant and were reflected to the surface of the asphalt road, creating numerous small holes. The third round, forth round, and fifth round was shot, and the color gradually drained out of the men’s faces.

“Monster……”

Volkov reflected the laser beams that could even cut metal, that was a fact that they didn’t anticipate. The originally reliable weapons turning into scrap metal, the men could only step back to their armored cars. Seeing the scene in front of him, the giant slowly bent his knees as though he was in convulsions.

All of a sudden, he jumped into the sky as if he sprung up. The flaming figure jumped into the night sky like the blazing sun, then rapidly landed in front of the armored cars with a bang. The men hastily jumped down from the armored cars, while the giant raised the car that was five times larger than him with his powerful arms.

“UAAAARRRGGGGHHH!”

After the short roar, the armored car was thrown towards the other cars. After a loud sound of collision rang, the two cars that collided were immediately engulfed in blazing flames, and exploded.

Then, he continued to advance towards the largest armored car, pulling off the bumper as though it was origami, then removed the heavy, metal armor with his strong arms, then viciously hitting the exposed parts of the car with his right arm.

That was a rapid movement that was like an arrow. His right arm emitted a radiance in an instant, giving off energy like a light ray. After that, the body of the car expanded like a balloon, then exploded into a vibrant ball of flame.

However, the police did not stop there.

A humming noise came form the propellers of a helicopter that circled in the air, then dropped something from the air like it was laying eggs.

It’s a bomb. It fell directly above Volkov, a piece of steel that emitted a dull luster.

Lilith shouted: “Volkov! Above you! Run!”

After hearing her shouts, Volkov raised his head and looked at the sky in a rough movement, and then raised his right hand slowly.

At the next instant, a block of energy similar to the one that broke down the armored car was shot from his hands. The bomb exploded in the air like fireworks, turning into powder that scattered all around. Being assaulted by the blast wave, Lilith's body was swept beside me.

After the blast calmed down, Volkov was still standing there as though nothing had happened. A bright light was given off by his right hand. The light was even stronger than the radiance before this, dying the surroundings into a solemn, white world.

"That's enough, Volkov! Stop!"

However, Lilith's words were not heeded by him.

The light that was like the laser beams was shot from his right hand— the ray of light had the combined power of tens of laser guns— directly swept through the night. The helicopter that was originally soaring in the night skies exploded, vanishing into thin air. A few black fragments fell onto the surface of the road further away from here like crows that lost energy, and burnt in a small fire.

There weren't anyone besides us in this area.

The cars that were utterly eradicated burned, spouting black smoke towards the night sky like a flaming pillar. The flames on the countless fragments scattered on the ground illuminated the whole place.

This is a battlefield. A battlefield full of death and slaughter that does not allow the presence of anyone, filled with flames and horror.

The giant indifferently looked at the condition of our surroundings, then turned around to look at us.

After that, he slowly moved towards us.

His silhouette that was in a background of the remains of the burning armored cars looked like a demon that just rose in a mythical world. The abnormally piercing eyes surfaced in the night like a lighthouse.

I recalled the words that he once said.

— Volkov- once- entered- wars.

That’s right—

—Volkov- killed- a lot.

He is a weapon. A killing weapon that hides a terrible destroying power.

Finally, the giant stopped in front of us. The large shadow covered Lilith and I.

“Vol…… Kov?”

Lilith mumbled, while he silently extended his powerful arms. He used his right arm to carry Lilith. The flames surrounding the giant had disappeared.

“Wa- Wait a minute!”

The giant did not answer the troubled Lilith, but extended his arm towards me as well. I was immediately carried by his left arm.

In the appalling heat of the flames and the din of sirens, the giant bent his knees, forcefully kicking on the ground, shooting into the night sky.

Thus, we were brought into darkness by him.

battery=03:58:01

You really couldn’t imagine the usual Volkov by the speed that he’s running at now.

He dashed on the streets, rushing down the stairs, ramming into the railings, weaving here and there in the city. Lilith and I lied in his strong arms like babies, blankly staring at the night scene faraway.

After about ten minutes, we reached the bottom of a steel bridge that nobody passes by. A large river that was about thirty meters wide flowed in the darkness, while the iron bridge was above it. I could not hear any sounds of sirens, so it seems like we put quite a distance between the place where we battled the police and us.

I lost my lower body, so I could not sit normally, and could only sit on the rack of the bridge. Lilith lied weakly on the ground as well, using her left arm to tightly press her shoulder that lost its right arm, looking at the pitch black, colossal robot that stood beside us like a guarding of a temple.

“What’s…… with you?”

Lilith asked in a worried tone, but he didn’t answer, and just stared unblinkingly at us.

“Volkov Galosh.” Lilith called his name in a low tone, “Say something.”

“……” The black giant kept silent.

A train slowly passed through the iron bridge above us. Lilith’s hair danced in the wind, then fell onto her shoulders again.

“…… Seriously.” Lilith stood up after supporting herself on the surface of the ground wit her left hand.

“Lilith?”

“I need to get this guy to wake up.”

Lilith approached him, then—

She knocked Volkov’s waist.

‘Hey hey! Hey hey! Anyone inside! Anyone inside!”

Lilith knocked on Volkov’s waist with all her might— instead of saying knocked on, I should say that she hammered it.

“I know that there’s someone inside!” She shouted threateningly, “Get out immediately!”

At that moment.

Volkov's eyes suddenly lit up. Then, his neck moved creakingly. Volkov looked at the young girl hammering his body.

And then he said with his slow tone as usual.

"Oh…… Volkov- is here- is here."

"Too slow!" Lilith mercilessly hit his arm.

"Lilith- so- violent."

"It's all your fault!" Lilith hit Volkov again. Her silhouette looked just like a girl that argued with her lover.

Lilith turned around to look at me, and shrugged while saying: "Seriously, he just brings trouble to us." In contrast with her casual remark, her expression looked more like she was relieved.

"Mnn, anyways…… Thanks for just now."

Lilith shifted her gaze shyly, muttering: "…… Thank you."

"Lilith- embarrassed."

"Shut up."

Lilith turned her head to another side, while Volkov scratched his head. Seeing their usual interactions, I was rather relieved as well. A train passed by the iron bridge above us again, and vibrations came from behind us.

After the clamoring noise stopped, I asked.

"Lilith, are you okay?"

The left part of her face was charred, and seemed to be very painful. That was the marks that was left after being shot by the police's laser gun. Besides that, the place where her right arm was supposed to be became empty.

"……" Lilith did not answer.

"Lilith?"

“Ah, mnn, I’m alright. It’s just that the conditions of my auditory settings aren’t that good. Instead, I should ask, are you alright?”

“I, well……”

I looked at my lower body, wires and tubes were poking out like innards.

“Ah, sorry. It’s impossible that you’re okay.”

“The main thing is my circuits are still functioning, so it’s basically okay.”

“…… Is that so.”

It seemed that Lilith wanted to say something else, but stopped. Perhaps she thought that it’s meaningless to discuss our wounds right now.

“Then…… What should we do?”

“Mnn……”

Lilith buried her face between her knees.

“Volkov, any ideas?”

During important occasions, she would always ask for Volkov’s opinions.

The giant slowly raised his head, making a ‘Hmm……” noise.

“Volkov- don’t- know.”

“Sigh……” Lilith pressed her hand to her forehead, saying the long-expected words, “I’m the dumb one for asking you about this.”

After that, she asked me instead.

“How about you, Iris?”

“Well…… I think it’s better for us to hide ourselves right now.”

“Mnn, it’s still too dangerous for us to escape to a city nearby. Leaving would need to wait till things settle down……”

Lilith said the words that only a fugitive would say. No, we’re already fugitives now.

“But staying here isn’t good. Let’s find a more suitable place to hide in the dark.”

“Yeah.”

“Volkov, carry Iris.”

Volkov silently nodded, extending his arm to me.

battery=03:45:32

The three of us walked along the river.

For every step that Volkov took, the pebbles on the riverbank would be crushed. The sounds of the pebbles getting crushed rang time after time, while I looked forwards with my vision that swayed now and then because of Volkov’s steps, in his arms.

A boundless sandy path was before us, while on our left was a straight, black river. There weren’t any streetlights by the river, and I couldn’t help but feel as though we were walking in a dark tunnel.

What’s in front of us? Where are we going? The darkness in the night seeped into my body, causing myself to gradually become queasy.

After we walked for awhile, the sound of Lilith’s humming suddenly rang beside us. The relaxed tune calmed me slightly. If only I was here, I might have cried long ago.

After she finished humming the song.

“Hey, Iris.” Lilith walked with her usual stride, turning her head over to look at me, “Can I ask you for a favor?”

“What is it?” I looked at Lilith from Volkov’s arms.

“Continue the story.”

"…… Hmm?"

"Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke."

"But we don't have the book right now."

Lilith stayed silent for a moment, then said: "Don't you remember the contents?"

"Eh?"

I stared at her in surprise.

"Haven't you read and memorized all of it? I know that you read all of it already."

"E- erm, well……" I started to stutter.

"Is the condition of your eyesight that bad?"

Hearing her questions, I gulped. The rain in front of me stopped for a moment.

Lilith wore a complicated expression on her face, staring at me unblinkingly from the other side of the rain. She worriedly furrowed her brows, though an encouraging smile surfaced at the corner of her lips.

"I know that, we've been together all these times after all. You kept dropping the waste materials recently, and walked unsteadily."

She was right.

Recently, my vision worsened rapidly. I could still see if it's 'drizzling', but my field of vision would be blocked by white vertical lines when it's 'pouring'. Also, the times when it poured dragged on and on as the days go by.

That was why I wanted to finish the book before I lose my eyesight. I don't want the gentle book club meetings to end because of me.

"Sorry for making you worry for me." I apologized. Lilith's long hair swayed as she shook her head.

"You don't need to apologize. …… You finished the books?"

I nodded.

“Then let me ask you again. I want to know how Darke turned out to be.”

Lilith raised her head and looked at me. Her tone was rather polite for Lilith.

“…… Alright, I understand.”

I don’t think that we’re doing leisurely matters in times of urgency. I think that Lilith probably felt uneasy if we don’t do anything. It’s the same for me. And Volkov might have the same feelings as well.

In the darkness, without a destination, without a safe place to be, and not knowing when they would chase us.

We need this story right now.

The story of the happy and gentle memories of the black shirted demon god that usually goofs off but is actually very understanding, and the serious but careless silver ring.

Thus, I started to read.

The ‘late night book club meeting’ started.

“Flo Snow’s body kept trembling because of shock. That’s right, Darke prepared a new ring just for her.”

I was at the seventh volume of the series ‘The Demon God’s Gift’.

As the story unfolded, Lilith kept making noises like ‘Ah!’ ‘Uuu……’ and so on beside me. Hugging me, Volkov would sometimes make deep pondering noises as well. They were both passionate readers.

In the sixth volume before this, the magical ring Flo Snow lost her confidence, and ‘ran away from home’, form the castle of the demon god. After that, Darke created a ‘new ring’ to replace her— that was the first half of the seventh volume.

In the last part of the seventh volume, the reason that Darke created a new ring was exposed.

The new ring would be the ‘new body’ of Flo Snow. Flo was originally a ‘soul’ slumbering in the demon world shrine that revived using the ring as a medium. After years of wear and tear, the ring that was the medium became worn out, and Darke made a new ring to move Flo there after he noticed the fact. The reason that he left the castle for a long time was to collect materials for Flo as well.

“Darke said in a gentle voice: ‘My beloved Flo Snow. I want to give you a present today.’ After saying so, he took out a white, pristine ring. The ring was a beautiful ring formed from crystals that were shaped like snowflakes. ‘Now, you wouldn’t have any trouble now. Forever, eternally alright.’ The touched Flo did not know what to say. However, at this moment—”

After shifting Flo’s soul to the new ring, abnormalities appeared in Darke’s body. To create the new ring, he used up all his magic powers.

“Darke’s body slowly, gradually turned into light particles, melting into the air. Flo blankly stared at his silhouette, shouting: ‘Ahh, Darke, please don’t go! Don’t leave me alone!’ Darke gently held her arm and said: ‘Flo, I’m sorry. Also, thank you for all that you’ve done. I—’ Darke turned into a ball of light, showing a last smile, ‘liked you all along.’ After saying that, Darke’s body turned completely into light particles, splattering all around. Then, the light particles rose to the sky and vanished.”

After I read that, I stopped. Weeping sounds came beside me.

“Lilith?”

“Darke……” Lilith pressed her left hand to the corner of her eyes, wiping away tears. After that, she muttered in a rather discontented tone. “I thought that it would be a happy ending too……”

I breathed in after finishing the rest of the seventh volume.

As though we were recollecting the better parts of the story, the three of us walked silently for quite some time.

After about five minutes, I said.

“Then, we’ve reached the eighth volume. The final volume—”

Lilith raised her hand, “Wait a minute, Iris. Let’s hear about the next volume another time. It’s really a waste to listen to all of it in one go, and also……”

Probably because she recalled a part of the story, Lilith teared up. I answered: “…… Got it.”

“Volkov, is that okay?”

Lilith asked. Volkov nodded lightly.

After the book club meeting ended, the three of us continued to go forward silently. As though we were walking in a pitch dark tunnel, we walked to the depths of the darkness, walking further in. As for what awaits us, none of us knows.

Only the sounds of the flowing water and the sound of the rain silently rang.

battery=02:14:17

The person who found that place was Lilith.

When it was almost dawn, we started to get anxious about finding a place for us to hide for the day.

“Isn’t this the entrance to the waterways?”

Lilith pointed at the waterways entrance below the iron bridge. The area was covered with bushes, and the entrance rusted all over as well. This reminded me that the demon god Darke used an exit covered with bushes when he left the castle secretly.

“Volkov, try to open it.”

Listening to Lilith’s instructions, Volkov bent his knees, extending his hands towards the cover of the waterways. Noise of metallic friction rang, then the cover opened with a clank.

A hole was below the lid, tempting us to enter the dark underground world.

“What now?”

I observed the hole while asking, then Lilith answered: “We can only go in. It’s going to be daytime soon.”

“But……” I looked at Volkov.

“Ah, that’s right……”

Lilith seemed to have noticed it too. The diameter of the hole leading to the waterways was about a meter wide. Disregarding Lilith and I, Volkov could never get into the hole.

She sighed lightly, saying: “Then we don’t have any choice. Let’s find another place.” Lilith abandoned the plan of using the waterways.

At that moment, Volkov suddenly said.

“Volkov- stay.”

“Hmm?” Lilith had took a few steps forward. She turned around and said, “What are you talking about, Volkov?”

“Volkov- stay. …… Lilith- and- Iris- go.”

“Eh? You’re telling us to leave first?”

Volkov nodded.

“Idiot, what are you pretending to be cool for.”

LIlith flicked Volkov’s arm with her fingers. However, Volkov did not answer Lilith, but placed his large right arm on her shoulders.

“W- what’s the meaning of your hand……?”

“Here.”

“Eh?”

“They’re- here.”

That was the darkest moment before dawn.

Countless dots that looked like stars appeared in the sky that Volkov was looking at.

“Hey! Aren’t those the army!”

The dots in the night sky enlarged. Those were helicopter units. The searchlights passed over the top of our heads.

“Lilith- go- quickly.”

“What are you talking about! We’re escaping together!”

However, Volkov forcefully held Lilith’s shoulders, repeating his previous words.

“Volkov- stay.”

Then, he forcefully carried Lilith, pushing her down the entrance.

“Wait a minute, Volkov! Let go of me!” Lilith frantically struggled, but Volkov did not stop.

“Military- chasing- Volkov.”

Volkov carried me as well, pushing me down the waterways after Lilith.

That moment, Volkov suddenly looked at me. His eyes seemed like they were soundlessly pleading something. That would probably be—

“Lilith, let’s go.”

I pulled Lilith.

“Wait, why are you saying this as well!”

“Please consider Volkov’s feelings.”

“I—”

“Broke.” Volkov suddenly said, “Volkov- broke.”

“……Eh?” Lilith stared at Volkov with uneasiness written all over her face.

As though he was talking about things that did not concern him, he explained: “Volkov- burnt- in- truck. Safety- circuit- broke. So- Volkov- used- weapons……. So- it- activated.”

“Activated…… what?”

Lilith asked cautiously as though she was afraid of hearing the answer, while Volkov answered in his usual deep voice.

“Self-destruct setting.”

At that instant, Lilith was dumbfounded.

Volkov doesn’t lie, and doesn’t joke.

Not even once.

I grabbed the ladder of the waterways, looking at Volkov’s face again. A silent but determined will was hidden in the pair of square eyes.

I noticed. Volkov was scared. He was scared that he would trouble us if he ran away with us as a military robot.

Lilith slowly shook her head, asking.

“You’re joking, right? Self-destruct settings and such, those were just lies that you just thought of…… right?”

Lilith gazed at him with a penetrating stare.

Volkov answered simply: “Really.”

“So- goodbye.”

The cover of the entrance was covered up. Volkov’s face gradually disappeared as well.

“Volkov, no! Don’t decide things by yourself! We’re running away together!”

He did not answer Lilith, but looked at me while saying.

“Iris, I’ll leave Lilith to you.”

I nodded. His determination wouldn’t be stopped. Also, we can’t stop him by our powers alone.

But Lilith did not give up, she shouted “What are you doing, stop that! Let go of me!”, while frantically pushing away Volkov’s hands with her left hand. Volkov tightly held Lilith’s arms, sealing her movement. Then, he stared directly at Lilith.

“…… Volkov?” Lilith shot an uneasy gaze towards the giant who suddenly stopped his movements. Volkov gazed at Lilith soundlessly. It was as though time stopped flowing at

that moment, the two gazing at each other.

“Lilith.”

That moment, Volkov’s words weren’t discontinuous like usual, but fluent like the words of a young man.

Those words sounded just like a confession.

“It’s so great to have met you.”

Lilith’s eyes turned round. Her lips trembled, looking as if she wanted to say something.

But at the next instant, Volkov rammed into her.

“Ahh!” Lilith made a short shout, falling into the depths of the waterways. I fell in there along with her.

At the last moment when before we fell, I saw a sad glow in Volkov’s eyes. Even so, the entrance of the waterways was quickly covered, and the glow vanished.

battery=02:01:40

We fell into the waterways. Lilith and I created a huge wave, and were flushed into a torrent.

“Uwaa!”

I floated back after sinking for a moment, and was helplessly flushed along with the current. I frantically rowed with my arms, but my destroyed body couldn’t do anything.

“Iris!”

Lilith poked her face out of the surface of the water, then caught hold of my arm. After that, she carried me to the concrete bank.

We were flushed about a hundred meters away. Carrying me, Lilith climbed out of the water.

"…….cough, cough!"

She spitted out a large amount of water while maintaining the posture of supporting her left leg. The ladders were all built beside the water flow in these passages.

"…… Seriously, what do he think he's doing!"

Lilith scolded. 'Ka, ka ka……." After making those odd noises, I finally spoke.

"Li- LIlith…… ka ka……"

It seemed that my circuits short-circuited after being soaked by water.

"Are you okay? You're drenched."

Lilith raised my body as if she was holding a baby, forcefully shaking me up and down. Large droplets of water flowed out of my body, wetting her foot.

"Isn't this bad luck!"

Lilith shouted in frustration. She frowned, showing an angry expression.

However, I know that she's just trying to be brave. The proof is that she kept staring at the 'upstream' direction of the waterways.

That was the place where Volkov parted ways with us.

I silently stared at the same direction. The water flowed very quickly downstream, and the passage does not connect with the upstream direction, so it's impossible to swim back.

After sinking into deep thought for awhile, she raised her head again.

"Let's go, Iris."

"…… Alright."

I answered lightly. After that, Lilith carried me on her back.

battery=01:49:52

We stayed silent for a long time.

Though I couldn't help in any way, I still tried to contribute— I changed the lights in my visual settings to a torch, illuminating the road before us.

I kept pondering about Volkov on Lilith's back. What happened to him after that? Did he battle the military? The self-destruction setting— was it engaged?

Lilith did not speak. She must be thinking of the same thing.

After about ten minutes.

Lilith suddenly spoke: "That guy, is really slow. His sight wasn't good, and his hearing wasn't good either. He even stutters when he speaks."

"Mnn……"

What is Lilith trying to say?

"One of the reasons is that it's a problem from the days when he was in the army, but that wasn't the only thing."

After saying that, she lowered her voice.

"It's my fault."

"…… How?"

"It decreased a lot recently, but there were a lot of bombs at the construction sites at the start. The most common situation was about three robots would get bombed every day.

…… Seeing that situation, wouldn't most people refrain from carrying waste materials that looks like bombs?"

She adjusted her posture, pushing me upwards. I hugged her again.

Lilith's voice started to tremble. "But that guy didn't do that. He just looks for materials that look like bombs to carry."

"Why? Isn't that suicidal?"

"Yep, it's suicidal. No matter how tough Volkov is, he would still turn into scrap metal after being bombed again and again. Even so, that guy still carried the bombs. Why do you think he did that?"

I did not speak. LIlith continued in a trembling voice.

"It was for me."

She said helplessly, her words were much quicker than usual when she spoke in the trembling voice.

"He's such an idiot. Saying something like 'I won't break down even if the bombs exploded', then he carried even my portion. But he broke down bit by bit. Can't see well, can't hear well, and even his way of talking became strange. Even so, that guy still carried the bombs. After I told him to stop, what do you think he said?"

Lilith picked up her pace, as though she wanted to get something off our track.

"Volkov- carry- bomb."

She mimicked Volkov's way of speaking.

"Lilith- safe."

Her voice stopped in misery.

"Volkov- happy……"

At that moment, she suddenly stopped.

"Really…… such an…… idiot……"

Liquid dripped onto my arm that was around her shoulders. The droplets of water flowed past my arm to the ground.

—Volkov- knows- how- to- kill.

Volkov's words resounded in my mind.

—But- don't- know- how- to live.

He said that he didn't know how to live at that time. He said that with a sorrowful expression.

But the truth isn't so. He found it.

Meeting Lilith, carrying bombs for Lilith, battling the police and even the military just for Lilith.

—It's so great to have met you.

He said that when we parted ways. I thoroughly understood that now.

He lived for Lilith. That was the second life of Volkov Galosh after he lost his battlefields.

Lilith was still crying silently.

I stayed silent, it's just that some force gathered in my arms.

Like what Professor used to do, I hugged her gently from the back.

That was some time after a deafening explosion rang from above.

It's probably the sound of our friend being blown to pieces.

battery=01:28:13

Cold wind echoed through the waterways. The wind stopped suddenly in an instant.

Lilith stopped moving.

I asked “Lilith?”, while she twitched her nose, turning around to look at me with moist eyes.

“Do you hear anything?”

Lilith listened while saying quietly. I adjusted my auditory settings to the most sensitive value as well.

I could hear the sound of the rain, wind, flowing water, and—

Human footsteps.

Footsteps of many people.

“It seems like they’re still chasing us.”

Lilith bit her lips.

The matter that she was thinking about was transmitted to me through her trembling shoulders. Since the military is here, that would mean that the force that could block them is now gone. However, Lilith and I did not mention him again. If we mention him, Lilith would cry, and I would feel pained as well.

We speedily walked forwards. Using the illumination from my visual settings, we continued to walk in the passages of the waterways. Sometimes, I would hear the voices of men reflected in the passages.

“Look!”

Lilith said in a low voice.

“The exit.”

I looked at the ceiling. There was a ladder on the wall, and a hole above it. It was similar to the hole that we entered through.

“Are we already in Oval City?”

“Yeah, we’re probably in the city now.”

“What should we do?”

“We can only go out. …… We’ll get noticed sooner or later if we continue to stay here.”

From just now, the voices and footsteps of the men was getting louder and louder.

“Hold me tightly.”

Carrying me on her back, Lilith grabbed the ladder on the wall, climbing upwards one rung after another. After thirty seconds, the round metal cover appeared above us. That lit would be the exit from the waterways.

In the stead of Lilith who lost her left arm, I extended my arm, carefully pushing away the cover of the waterways. Light shone in gradually from the seams.

When the lid was half open, Lilith poked her head out.

“Right, that’s lucky!”

She opened the cover completely, allowing me to go up first, then jumped out after me.

Probably because it was already daytime, the long-awaited world on the ground looked exceptionally piercing. The place where we came out from was an alley located between buildings with trash scattered all around, and dirty water on the ground. Are the sounds coming from a distance sound of an engine?

Lilith closed the cover of the waterways, then shouted in a triumphant voice as though she was encouraging herself.

“Right, this is the second act of the escapade!”

At that moment, I thought that we finally escaped the military’s clutches.

However, we were too naive. I should have thought that the military would have posted people at the entrances of the waterways if they were careful.

“Then let’s go, Iri—”

Her words were interrupted before she even finished speaking.

Two rays of light penetrated her body.

battery=01:24:41

“Ah……!”

Like a puppet that lost its strings, Lilith’s body bent, lying down on the ground.

“Lilith!”

“Uuu……!” Lilith pressed her hand on her chest, curling up on the ground. Large amounts of black machine oil surged out from her body, spreading on the ground like a puddle of blood.

“Don’t move! This is an order!”

An angry roar reverberated in the small alley, two men wearing military clothing ran towards us. Laser guns were held in their hands.

“What’s that, there’s another one.”

One of the men seemed to have noticed my presence.

“Are we dealing with ‘this one’ as well?” “Mnn, that’s right.” They casually decided on my death as though they were discussing the menu of their lunch.

A gun was pointed at my face. The heat remaining in it caused it to smoke.

—Ahhhh, am I dying?

I stare at the gun blankly. Like the time when I was dismantled, I could not feel the incoming death, and started to run away from reality—

At that moment.

“Kaaaaaaaaa!”

Lilith stood up while roaring like a wild beast, ramming the man in front. The man immediately lost his balance.

Using this chance, Lilith grabbed my left arm, running away quickly.

A familiar sentence ‘Stop! This is an order!’ came behind us, but she continued to run like the wind.

After we passed through the alley, we arrived at a wide road. Quite a few cars were passing through the road before us.

“Ahh! What’s that!?”

A female who passed by screamed after seeing Lilith and I. Seeing myself with only my upper torso left and Lilith, who had machine oil seeping out of her chest and had only one arm, the surrounding crowd started a commotion.

The angry roars of the military people came closer from behind. After thinking for a moment, Lilith ran towards the road.

“Lilith, where are you goin—”

“We’re riding that!”

There was a small truck waiting for the lights to turn green at the direction where Lilith was shouting at. At the instant when the lights turned green, and the truck started to move, Lilith threw me into the trailer and slipped in after me as well.

After that, the truck moved.

battery=01:16:56

Sounds of sirens echoed all around us, but the truck continued to pass through the city.

“Lilith, Lilith, are you okay!?”

In the trailer of the truck, I frantically called Lilith.

Her face twisted in agony. There were fist-sized holes on her chest and her abdomen, the exposed tubes splattering oil all around like mad snakes.

“Iris……”

“Wha- what is is?”

So that I would hear her words clearer, I shifted my face closer.

She said in a hoarse voice: “Get down the car immediately after passing the busy street.”

“But……” I looked at her wounds. She was unquestionably badly hurt— no, deathly hurt. On the other hand, I could not move because I lost my lower body. My system that used the three main circuits was unharmed. However, Lilith was different. The large amount of machine oil that flowed out showed evidently that her important circuits was damaged.

Even so, she still raised her upper torso. Then, she coughed out black machine oil.

“Lilith!”

“I’m okay.” She used the back of her left hand to wipe away the machine oil at the corner of her mouth, smiling forcedly at me, “This is just a small matter.”

In contrast with her words, black liquid flowed continuously out from her chest and her abdomen.

After the truck drove for about five minutes, we passed the center of the city, and arrived at a deserted suburban path.

“Okay, jump down.”

Lilith hugged me. I cursed my inability to move while feeling shocked because of her hardiness.

Taking the chance when the truck decelerated, Lilith jumped down from the trailer—instead of saying jumped, it’s actually more like rolled. The truck did not notice us and left just like that.

Lilith stood up unsteadily and looked around. It’s fortunate that nobody was around us.

“Ah, let’s go inside.”

An old house was in front of Lilith. The name of the agent of the asset and the words ‘For Sale’ were written on the signboard.

Lilith carried me on her back again, walking towards the backyard of the house with unsteady steps. Being carried on her back, I couldn’t do anything.

We passed through the entrance and walked into the yard. It was a barren land that was full of weeds.

She lied down below the eaves. As long as people don’t walk into the yard, they wouldn’t see us from the road.

“Lilith……”

I called her name like I was sighing.

Lilith’s body couldn’t hold on anymore. Probably because her posture wasn’t good when she jumped down, quite a few wires and the circuits were exposed from the holes where she was shot. The tubes that were leaking currents twitched like a living creature, creating sparks all around.

—If this goes on, her battery level……

“Heh heh…… This is bad……” Lilith said in a relaxed tone and touched her chest while retaining her posture. She wanted to use her hands to stuff the exposed circuits back into her body, but it was useless.

“Iris.”

“What is it?”

“Well……”

She took out a square box from the hole on her chest.

It was a card box that was stained black by the machine oil.

“Open it.”

I opened the box according to her instructions, and a plastic card was placed in it. The familiar name of a bank was written on it.

“…… A cash card?” I looked at Lilith.

“That’s right. The password is HRM019, my certification number.”

I didn’t know what she wanted to say. Why is she handing the cash card to me now?

“Also, at the bottom of the card box……” Lilith quietly instructed me, “There’s a paper right? Openit.”

I opened the paper at the bottom of the box according to her instructions. It was a map of Oval City and a neighboring city. Only one place was circled with a pencil.

“It’s a junk parts store.”

While saying that, black machine oil trickled down from the corner of her mouth.

“Remember? I mentioned it to you before this. A robot called Lightning.”

Lightning— that seemed to be the name of a robot that works at a junk parts store that Lilith mentioned before this. A large robot that is similar to Volkov.

“Go there and ask him to fix you.”

“O…… Okay.”

“Be careful when you move. You must hide immediately after that, I recommend you to hide below cars. And also—”

I uneasily interrupted her. “Wa- wait a minute. A- aren’t you going as well?”

“Idiot. …… Of course I can’t go like this.”

“After I reached the junk parts store, I’ll ask them to come help you. So, you just wait he __”

This time, Lilith interrupted me. “Iris, listen.”

Her tone was quite determined, but her gaze started to fade. The gleam in her eyes darkened, indicating that her battery level was getting low.

“I can’t go on anymore.”

Hearing that, my chest tightened.

“Lilith, don’t say that. As long as I ask the person in the junk parts store, you would……”

Lilith shook her head vigorously, liquid flowing down from her neck. “No, you can’t be fixed if you don’t have enough money. Definitely not.”

“Lilith, wait a minute. I can’t just leave you here and go.”

I pleaded while gazing at her. However, Lilith shook her head and said: “Never mind, hurry up.”

Abandoning Lilith and running away alone. I can’t and won’t do this.

I handed the card box back to her. “…… No. I definitely wouldn’t want to escape alone. That’s why I’m not accepting this.”

At that instant.

“Iris Rain Umbrella!” Lilith grabbed my shoulder with her left hand, widening her eyes so much that it’s scary, “Don’t be so naive!”

Her angry roar made me cringe. Her ferocity swayed my whole body.

“Listen, you must live on! If only you have that card, you can be repaired! But I can’t go on anymore! So only you can be fixed!”

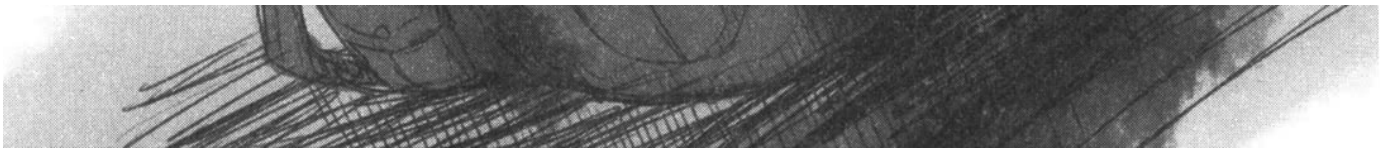
“Bu- but!”

“Have courage! You must have the courage to live on even if you’re alone! This world isn’t that simple! If you get weak, you’ll be turned into scrap metal!”

She violently coughed out some machine oil. The black liquid splattered onto my face as well.

Even so, she still continued.

“Alright, go! Faster!”



“But, but!”

“Iris! Don’t trouble me anymore!”

Lilith stared at me with a clouded expression. While holding her hands, I said repeatedly like a spoiled child: “No, I don’t want to……”

Just like that, I refused her for quite some time.

A gentle smile suddenly surfaced on Lilith’s face.

She lifted her left hand, lightly touching my face. Her hand was stained with machine oil. “Iris. Let me tell you something……”

Lilith said as though she was educating me.

“This world…… is more random than you think. …… This place is unexpectedly full of seams, as long as you think of ways, you’ll be able to live on.”

Her slender fingers touched me lovingly, while I just stared blankly as the light in her eyes gradually faded.

“That’s why it’s okay. Even if you’re alone, you can still live on. …… Have some confidence. Because—”

She looked directly at my eyes, saying in a hoarse voice.

“You’re a robot that was loved up till the last second.”

After saying that, power left Lilith’s hand and it fell from my face.

I did not speak.

What Lilith said must be correct. Compared to myself, who doesn’t know about anything, she who lived on with her own power would probably be right.

However, even so, I still have some parts that I could not agree with.

What should I do? If it were to be Professor, what would she do at these time?

That's right, Professor would—

"Lilith, listen to me."

I opened the cover on my chest, taking out the gray cigarette case. That was a memento keeping the group photo between Professor and I. After opening the lid, I took out the 8-shaped circlet cigarette in it.

"Before this, Professor told me. We're just like this 8-shaped circlet cigarettes. …… See, this would break the 8 into two circlets……"

I broke the 8-shaped cigarette in half. One circlet would be used for someone who wants to quit smoking, the other part would be used as an ashtray. After that, I pressed the two circlets together again.

"See, it'll be a 0 if there's only one, and it'll be another 0 over here. But you'll get a 8 when you combine them. Combining them would make them more powerful— that is the number 8, and they are us.

That was a view that I learnt from Professor, a casual remark by Professor in one of her special lectures. Seeing Professor's circlet cigarette, I remembered that.

Lilith stared at the cigarette in my hands, mumbling in an almost unperceivable voice: "Isn't this…… too hypocritical……" The gleam in her eyes was almost completely lost.

I don't care if it's hypocritical. I just don't wish for her to die, don't wish for her to lose hope for life. So, I continued to say.

"Professor and I, Lilith and Volkov, and Lilith and I right now, we're just like the 8-shaped cigarettes, two of us can be combined. It wouldn't do there isn't two. So, Lilith —"

My electronic voice sounded rather like my original voice at this moment.

"I'll definitely save you."

Lilith did not speak.

She just blinked and closed her eyes.

At this moment, her battery finally finished.

battery=00:58:34

I stared at Lilith without moving for quite some time.

Though I said all that, I felt uneasy already. Lilith led me before this, and we had Volkov's help when we were chased. But now that I'm alone, nobody would save me, and I couldn't think of anyone who could help me.

That place was near the Venus Fountain Plaza. From its position, it would probably be one of the shops at the commercial street. My location is the problem right now, but this could be easily deduced by looking at the tallest white building here— from the Oval University First Robotics Laboratory.

After deducing my position, when I was about to stuff the map back into the card box.

"Ah……"

I noticed a tiny picture stuck on the interior of the box.

There were three people on the photo. The one at the center would be Lilith in a cute dress, while two people who looked like a couple of about thirty were smiling beside her.

The Lilith in the photo was smiling broadly, happily. Her smile was tender and innocent, and people couldn't imagine the majestic her right now.

I recalled the words that she said.

—Pitiless, right? Creating them when they need them and leaving them aside when they don't need them.

She shrugged at that moment, wearing a cold expression on her face.

I looked at the photo again, it was a happy family of three. The happiness that was like beautiful scenery were locked into the frame. She looked like an angel that doesn't know the meaning of suspicion in it, an innocent, happy smile on her face. She still didn't know about the coming betrayal that she would have to face after that.

My chest ached slightly. Up till now, how many times had she looked at the photo? What did she feel about her past, happy self?

Right until now, she hid the precious photo in her chest. Keeping the photo of her parents that abandoned her.

—Have some confidence. Because you're a robot that was loved up till the last second……

"Lilith……"

The clouded expression disappeared from Lilith's face as her battery was used up, and only a naive, innocent expression was on her face right now. I extended my right hand, gently touching her charred left face.

Black machine oil trickled out form the corner of my eyes like tears. One drop after another.

I vowed quietly to myself.

"I would definitely save you."

Definitely.

After that, I moved Lilith's body to a nearby forest, and I hid her carefully so that people would not notice. Then, I placed the card box and Professor's cigarette case into my chest.

After that, I pondered momentarily.

If I walked out like this, people would call the police very quickly. So that wouldn't work. I must think of a more reliable way to go to the junk parts shop that Lilith spoke of. However, I don't have a phone on me, and I can't use a public phone looking like this. Then, how could I walk to the junk parts store at the Venus Fountain Plaza?

According to my estimations, it's about two kilometers between the plaza and this place.

—Plaza?

Venus Fountain Plaza. These words made me recall something. The time when Professor and I passed by the plaza before this after we finished watching a movie. That's right, Professor helped a robot at the roadside that time. As for how the robot arrived at the plaza, I remember that—

Professor's words surfaced in my mind.

—This child…… He actually passed by such a narrow, dark place……

"The gutters……"

battery=00:43:08

Before I set out, I 'modified' my own body first.

I pulled out all of the tubes and wires poking out of my lower body that had been destroyed by the lasers. They'll only get in my way anyways, and they'll make noise when they get in contact with the road. After that, I took out the settings that won't function anymore out from my body. After taking out the movement system governing the movement of my lower body, my body felt much lighter.

After modification is complete, I left the yard of the house, arriving at the road. I opened the cover of the drainage cover nearest to me while nobody is here and squeezed myself into it. The gutter was rather cramped, so I could only sacrifice my left arm. I applied

force along with my shoulders, easily removing my left arm. The fact that my body was made using junk parts was useful for the first time. I stuffed the removed arm into the gutters.

Then, I set out.

The drains were covered with damp moss. I speedily crawled forward with only my head, right arm and body left. Like a zombie in a movie, I crawled forward while disregarding my image.

When I reached a corner of the drains, my body was bumped back. I bent my arms, twisted my head, adjusting the position of my body bit by bit, moving forwards slowly. I used the diagonal space, and finally passed through.

It seems that even if it's me, I have to put in effort to be able to do things.

A square cover that was similar to a metal fence was covered on the drains. The cover that was about thirty centimeters wide and a meter long extended to a faraway direction along the roadside. A few gauze-like holes were opened in the covers (Probably to let rainwater flow in), allowing me to spy on the situation outside. I looked outside time by time, ascertaining my position, then moved my arms silently again.

After moving forwards for about thirty minutes, I finally entered the commercial street in front of the Oval Station. From the signboard of the fish shop, I deduced that I was as the east area of the commercial streets, about five hundred meters away from the fountain plaza where the goddess statue resides. That reminded me of the time that I bought a fish at the shop three months ago, making a La Bier stew for Professor.

I could only crawl forwards using my right arm. Compared with using two hands, I could move my body even faster like this, it's rather ironic. Now, the left arm of unequal length wouldn't touch the floor again.

My vision was terrible— instead of saying terrible, actually I almost couldn't see anymore. My right eye lost its sight, and my left eye could only see through small blocks as though they were fragments of cut glass. If this place wasn't the commercial street in Oval, I would have given up long ago. That's right, I still have a chance. The Goddess haven't given up on me yet.

The people who were buying things in the commercial street would pass by the drains occasionally, and I would bate my breath, going forward stealthily at these times. The signboard of the butcher's flashed by. That's right. I bought things here three months ago

as well. I think I bought some meat here to make mutton soup, and I bought some onions at a grocery store as well. It's so nostalgic.

I'm back.

After turning at the corner from the grocery store, I finally arrived at the main street, and I would arrive at the Oval fountain plaza after going directly forwards. There's a goddess statue that resembles Professor at the center of the fountain. Lilith told me that the junk parts store would be on the road there, so it would probably be somewhere beside the main streets.

Thus, there's only fifty meters left.

I continued to go directly forward, my right arm forcefully extending forwards.

Just at that moment.

—!

My body suddenly became heavier.

It's bad, my battery will be used up soon.

I must hurry.

Faster. Even faster.

Thirty meters left.

A little more, just a little more.

Twenty meters left.

Moving my arm is so heavy and painful.

Ten meters left.

My arm hurts, a creaking noise came from my body as well.

Move, my body. There's just a little bit more, I'll reach it after going forward a little bit more.

Five meters left. Three meters left. ……

Right, I'm here!

I opened the drainage cover on top of me. Supporting my body with only my right arm, I arrived outside.

That was when I found out.

From the start, hope does not exist.

"…… Eh?"

The junk parts store was not there.

Among the shops arranged tidily on the commercial street, only a square space was left there like front teeth that had been pulled out.

—About one in the afternoon,

The news that I watched—

—At the Venus Fountain Plaza located at Oval Station,

The voice of the broadcaster—

There was a robot rampage incident.

It echoed in the emptiness of my mind.

Realizing the truth, I could only stare blankly at emptiness.

—Are you joking.

No matter how many times I looked over there, there wasn't any shop over there at all. Weeds grew from the flat land. Not only that.

—It's a joke, right?

A laundry shop was at the right, and a stationary shop was at the left, both of their doors were tightly closed. I could not doubt this, the empty space is indeed the place where a circle was drawn on the map.

Then, the words of the broadcaster combined with the words in my mind.

—A large robot that worked at a second hand shop nearby—

Second hand shop— junk parts store.

—Is it possible……

The despairing truth was ascertained in my mind.

The ‘Lightning’ that Lilith spoke of was the robot that I saw before this in the news. He broke down the shop as though he got mad, and was broken to pieces by laser guns at the fountain plaza. The large robot was him.

The head that was raised that time was Lightning.

battery=00:05:36

In front of the nonexistent junk parts store, I froze.

I did not know what to do.

I bet my last hope, dragging my heavy body to come here frantically.

I didn’t consider what would happen next.

The ‘rain’ that forced me to a corner was getting more and more terrible. The countless white lines that covered my sight increased drastically, the fragments of sight that I was left with squeezed me with the light sounds.

Being forced into a corner, I supported myself on the road with my skull.

What should I do? Lilith, what should I do?

Should I go back now? Impossible. I don't have any energy left. Besides, if my battery were to by used up on the way back, only death awaits me. That's right, battery. No matter what I do, the first thing I have to consider is the batte—

That moment, my body convulsed violently. I remembered something.

That's right, the Umbrella residence. I could recharge as long as I walk there, and I can undergo repair as well. Three months have passed now, can I still go in? Has the Umbrella residence been torn down?

To dispel all hesitation, I shook my head. This is not the time for me to ponder, the only place that I could go is there. I want to, and could only go there.

Disregarding my tired body, I used my last energy to raise my arm.

I extended my arm and clutched the surface of the road for the last slither of hope.

However.

—Warning.

A beeping electronic voice rang in my mental circuit. It sounded just like the sound that would be emitted by an ECG device when a heart stops beating.

The self-assured, long awaited electronic voice gave the most terrible warning.

—After five minutes, battery will be used up. Please recharge immediately.

It's the declaration of death. Declaring that only five minutes is left in my life, a merciless declaration.

This is not fair. How can things turn out like this? I hammered the road with my arm. Pain and despair caused anger to surge in my heart.

Even so, I continued to extend my right arm. As though I wanted to catch hold of my last hope, I laid my fingers on the road, dragging my body forwards. Tubes were exposed from the lower part of my body again. When the tubes come in contact with the road, it would emit an annoying metallic noise. Even so, I continued to extend my arm. Extending my arm again and again, again and again.

—Three minutes left. Please recharge immediately.

Time passed mercilessly, my arm became more and more heavy, causing my body to be even harder to move. It was as though the air used a powerful force to press on my body. Even so, I still used my only arm to crawl forward with all my effort.

—Two minutes left. Please recharge immediately.

The rain is getting heavier. It's not heavy rain, but a rainstorm, a rainstorm that hides everything. My movements almost stopped, only time continued to go forward.

—One minute left. Please recharge immediately.

The flames of strength and stamina rapidly diminished in me. My vow to Lilith that I would save her seemed just like a faraway memory, gradually losing its form. My soul was utterly severed from the depths of my body. Forty seconds left, thirty, ahhhh, twenty, ten—

—Battery has finished. System offline.

Ahh, it ended, it ended, I'm vanishing, vanishing, my life, Lilith's life, this is bad, are you joking, how, how could I, here, I, I—

At the moment when my heart was about to sink into despair.

A voice suddenly rang in my heart.

—Iris Rain Umbrella!

It was a majestic, powerful voice.

—Don't be so naive!

She shook me.

—Alright, go! Hurry!

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

I screamed. The voice that seemed like the roar of a wild beast did not sound like my voice at all.

I used up the small flame left in my body to raise my right arm.

Then.

Like a car that changed gears, something surged rapidly in my body. The system that went offline before this awoke while moaning, while my mental circuit became hot, burning to the extent that it almost melted. The lava of energy spurted out from the depts. Of my body, causing myself to move energetically.

I raised my right arm as though I was punching air, punching the road to go forward. The energy in my body was concentrated at my fingertips, dragging my body forwards.

—Iris!

Lilith's words strongly motivated me.

—Have courage!

Sparks flew on the surface on the road.

—You must have the courage to live on even though you're alone!

That's right! Have courage, Iris Rain Umbrella!

I raised my arm powerfully. Forward, forward, even if it's just a little, I flung my arm forwards, clutching the road, the future, and the promise that I made to her.

—The world isn't so simple!

In the hurricane, I used all my might, extending my arm towards the future.

—If you weaken, you might just become scrap metal!

My thoughts became confused in my overheated body, and the data became confused as well. The memories were like a torn album, fragments of the past dancing in the air. The torn memory fragments divided my live into a few parts, the happy life with Professor, the sudden farewell, the cut off limbs, myself after changing, moving waste materials, gut, intestines, Lilith, Volkov, escaping, laser beams, flaming giant— all of these raised my body abruptly, pushing against my back.

However, at the next instant.

—Eh?

The fragments of memories started to discolor, swirl, and pierced me maliciously. Those were the memories sealed in the depths of my mind— an unfamiliar house, an unfamiliar family, being hit, being kicked, being burned, escaping, escaping, cars, ahhh,

my arm broke, my leg broke as well, I'm squashed, flattened, it's raining, I'm alone, so lonely, what's with this, the memories, I, don't, remember, touch, pain, sorrow, all of these swirled in my body, compressed, spurted, flowed out, ahhh, hate, I hate the coldness, I hate the loneliness, why would I forget, why would I remember, I ran away, from the house, my family that hurt me, running away, escaping, dragging my body, dragging, being flattened by cars, but dragging my body even so, that's right, on that, rainy day, I, I, I, that person that person that person.

At that moment.

Abruptly.

Really abruptly.

As though only I was separated from the world, the time stopped.

It started raining.

battery=00:00:00

But Professor, my Professor was indeed standing there, she was smiling at me.

I lost all my energy, but was relieved. An emotion surged in the depths of my body, and I gazed at Professor absentmindedly.

Ahhh, Professor. You're alive. Why didn't you tell me earlier.

Professor, wait for me. I'm coming now.

By the way, Professor. Why do I feel that you look rather different today?

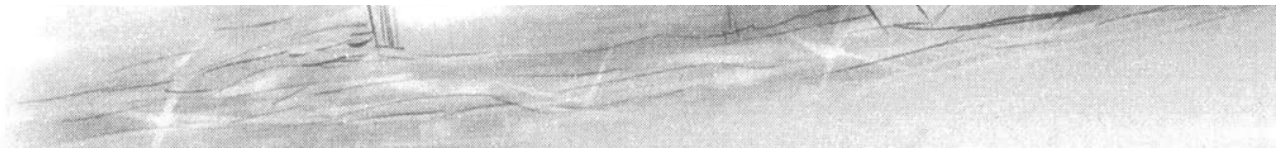
Why aren't you wearing your glasses today? Did you leave your glasses at home?

Why aren’t you wearing the cigarette case on your neck today? Ahh, it’s because it’s in my hands. I’ll return it to you right away.

Why are you wearing a snow white dress today? It’s different from the white coat that you wear usually. Do we have this dress at home?

And, and, Professor, Professor—

Why are you standing at the center of the fountain today?



Chapter 4 - Letters

“Iris, I love you the most.” (Wendy von Umbrella)

August 10 ‘Oval Times’ evening edition excerpt

National Defense Force Suppresses Robot Breakaway

The incident of the mass robot breakaway that happened at late night on ninth of August at RL Composite Construction Co. Ltd. was suppressed by the National Defense Force in the end.

A large robot that resisted at the outskirts of Ovalite City was successfully suppressed with the attacks of the military. After investigation, it was found that the robot was a military robot of model ‘F-110’ that once took part in the northern wars, and was the main force of the Mech Corps of the name ‘Ouroboros’.

As for the reason that the abandoned robot weapon was used at the construction site, RL company did not make a public statement. Besides that, the military department and robot manufacturer, Galosh Company, that took part in the development of ‘F-110’ model shall be hold on account…….

August 14 ‘Oval Times’ Social Edition excerpt

Paper Slips at the Scene Identified as Children Literature

The public relations department of the military made an official statement about the incident of the mass robot breakaway that happened at RL company on the ninth of August.

When the body of the large ‘F-110’ model robot that resisted till the end exploded, large amounts of papers were scattered on the scene. Citizens were concerned about the papers, therefore the contents of the papers are announced.

The papers were from a number of books. The remains of the burnt papers were confirmed to be from the children literary books ‘Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke’ (Eight volumes in total, Highcut Publications), written by Sandy Windbell.

As for the relationship of the books with the mass robot breakaway, it is still in investigation.

August 16 ‘Oval Times’ Column Excerpt

Modern Robotics 35 ‘The End of a Certain Robot.’

It happened on the morning of August 10.

At the Venus Fountain Plaza in front of the Oval Station, a man who was smoking a circlet cigarette to pass time while waiting for a train saw a strange scene.

A robot was collapsed in front of the goddess statue.

If that’s all, it would be just a small matter, but the strangeness of this time lies in what the robot did.

The collapsed robot had only its upper torso, its lower body seemed to have been bombed away. Only its head and its right arm was connected to its body.

However, the robot crawled forward by extending its only arm, dragging its body forward , passing by the main street of the commercial street to reach the side of the goddess statue. It used about ten minutes to crawl a distance of a hundred meters or so,

and it placed an item at the foot of the goddess statue when it reached the center of the fountain. It was a silver cigarette case. After that, the robot proceeded to mutter to the goddess statue as though it was in conversation with the statue. Probably because it used up its battery, it stopped.

After learning about this incident, I recalled the lecture that the prestigious Professor Umbrella who was the authority in robotic engineering who died in an accident last May. Professor pointed out that robot having 'hallucinations' might be one of the signs that happen when they go on a rampage. It might be a hallucination that was born from the robot's strong wish to search for its beloved owner.

After Professor passed away, though there weren't any evidence that could prove this hypothetical theory, I still felt interested in Professor's theory. Did the robot that appeared at the fountain plaza see hallucinations during its last moments as well? If Professor Umbrella is still alive, I would really feel like asking for her opinion. ……

(Omitted)

According to the results that I've inquired form the Robots Management Department of the Oval branch, the remains of the robot had already been disposed as scrap metal.

(Writer- Karen Cloudy)

Professor Umbrella's Letter

Professor Umbrella's letter found when tidying up her belongings.

Dear Iris:

Since you're reading this letter, it would mean that I'm not here anymore.

…… This pretentious way of writing seems just like a TV drama, it makes me feel rather embarrassed.

Writing this letter to you, I feel rather complicated.

However, telling you directly would make me feel too emotional (The main point is that it's too embarrassing), so it's better if I just tell you by writing.

Let's start from this matter.

Actually, the one who made you was not me.

I once explained to you that you're a robot that I made three years ago, but actually it's a lie.

Sorry.

However, there's a reason for my lie.

Three years ago, I met you.

That evening, I just came home, but I saw an unfamiliar robot below the arch entrance of my house.

That robot was you.

The first time that I saw you, you were like scrap metal that was just recycled. Your right arm and left leg were broken off, tubes and circuits poking out from your abdomen, almost all of your artificial skin peeled off as well.

I originally decided to pretend that I didn't see you, passing by your side.

Your appearance made me feel uncomfortable, and you appearing here would probably because of an illegal disposal case. Illegal disposal cases kept increasing that time. I wanted to contact the Robots Management Department to collect you.

But as I was about to pass by the arch entrance, you said that.

"Sister……"

I was taken aback.

That time, my sister died for half a year.

Also, your voice was very similar to my sister Iris'.

No, when I think about it, probably it's just because I brought in my own emotions. After losing my sister, I felt very lonely, and I would weep whenever I think about my sister.

Anyways, I saw you as my sister who was curled up like a cold kitten.

When I came to my senses, I already raised the umbrella above you. I couldn't let your body to continue to be drenched in rain.

After that, I carried you back home. I felt that you were very light when I carried you on my back, probably because your body lost its main components. Your main circuits couldn't function at all, and there are signs that a car passed through your abdomen. The damage on your mental circuit was especially terrible, and the previous data couldn't be replayed at all (That's the reason that you don't have memories of the past).

When I was repairing you, I gave you the name of 'Iris', and made you to take my sister's appearance. I have a reason for doing that as well.

You know this as well, there's a 'Robot Registration System' in this country. Because of the limitations of the system, the owners of robots can only confirm their responsibility and rights as a user after registering with the Robots Management Department. In other words, it's a residential system for robots.

Of course, I investigated about the person that registered you as well. That was how I found the name of your owner.

That person seemed to be quite wealthy. That's because the mental circuit and various parts in your body were made from expensive parts. However, at the same time— I'm hesitating whether I should write this, but I feel that you have the right to know the truth, so I decide to tell you.

When I found you, there were countless, extremely numerous signs of mistreatment on your body. The injuries that seemed like they were made by blunt weapons or knives were spread all over your body. Those made me think that the person had a deep obsession and insanity. When I think about the injuries again, I would shudder. The reason that I would check your skin closely during maintenance is also because of this. After some time, the 'previous injuries' would surface on your body. This is an occurrence that had no previous records in robotic engineering, and the reason that this happens is still in research.

Thus, I used the 'Will Ownership Registration System'. As long as the user is alive, a robot that is made to resemble a deceased relative cannot become the target of auction or confiscation. I used the loopholes in the law, so they cannot target you, and you would be excluded from the investigation list of the police.

For you, having my sister's appearance might make you feel happy. Making you to replace my dead sister might make you feel pained as well.

However, please believe me. I have never seen you as the replacement of my sister. It's true. To me, you're the one and only unique Iris in the world.

The letter dragged on for a long time now, but there's only a little left.

Right until now, I told you that the reason for my sister's death was because of a collision with a truck. Actually, that isn't true.

The truth is, the car that my sister and I did not collide with a truck, but collided violently with a robot that was going on a rampage. After that, my sister who sat beside me died just like that.

The reason that I started to fervently research robots that goes on a rampage and taking part in the judicial dissection is also because of this. So that victims like my sisters would not appear again, I wanted to contribute as a researcher.

The reason that I'm writing this letter right now is also because the research of rampaging robots is very dangerous. The robots that went on a rampage are very unstable, I cannot predict what type of 'unfortunate incidents' will happen because of them. Of course, the precautions that we use are very good, but this is still uncharted territories in science. That's why I'm writing this will as a precaution— this letter for you.

About the present that I want to give to you.

I think you know this, but besides researching rampaging robots, I help robots collapsed by the roadside as my lifelong goal as well.

This job started after I met you. Before this, I would pretend I didn't see them when I see the collapsed robots on the road. After the incident that made me lose my sister, I didn't approach robots when I'm not working.

However, I changed after living together with you. Whenever I find collapsed robots, I would recall the time when I met you. That's why I couldn't help but give them a hand.

This is the way of my living after I met you, after I saved you.

Dear Iris, I've prepared a small gift for you.

Unfortunately, your body cannot last long. I think the injuries and bruises surfacing on your skin would worsen after this.

So, I prepared a ‘spare’ body for you for that day. If you meet any special conditions, you can change the spare body with your current body. Letting you live on eternally happily, that’s my biggest wish.

Apart from maintenance and repairing, you can also ask my colleague, Ralph Ciel, if you have any questions.

He’s a reliable person, so he’ll be able to help you.

When I’m writing this letter, a drizzle started outside.

Similar to the day when I first met you, it’s a cold rainy day.

Meeting you— Iris in a rainy day like that, I think that this is because the goddess statue is guiding us.

That’s right, you always say that I look like the goddess statue.

Letting the goddess statue smoke a circlet cigarette would probably be quite interesting.

Let’s do a prank together next time, like hanging a cigarette case with circlet cigarettes in it on the goddess statue’s head. But would we get divine retribution for doing that? – this way of speaking seems to be unscientific.

Well, let’s just stop here.

Sorry, I cried a lot, even wetting the paper.

I promised to go watch a movie with you tomorrow. Because it’s a horror movie, you’ll probably make a scene. Heh heh heh, I’m looking forward to it.

Some last words.

Iris, I love you the most.

Wendy von Umbrella

Ralph Ciel's Reboot Experiment

Seeing the beautiful body of the young girl lying on the bed, Ralph sighed.

—A long time passed.

On that day three months ago, he once called the young girl to inform her of the bad news. Now, it seemed like something that happened long ago.

The remains of a robot that had only its head and right arm on was placed in a transparent box at the corner of the laboratory. To recycle this, he applied for a long holiday, frantically going here and there. Because of this, he finally found the mental circuit that is said to be the lifeline of a robot a few days ago.

He ended the final check up with his exhausted body. Then, he pressed the switch that provided electric power.

After a zap, the young girl's fair chest throbbed violently, then recovered its original state.

Ralph kept staring at the situation in front of him.

—That person was indeed a genius.

A red flush gradually surfaced on the young girl's white face. Including details like this, the workmanship of the robot is indeed meticulous.

"Mnn……"

Finally, the young girl made a slight noise.

Ralph stood up from the chair, approaching the bedside. The young girl slowly opened her eyes, a bright radiance reflected in her blue eyes. Though the color isn't the same, the profound eyes reminded Ralph of the deceased Professor Umbrella. The robot was made with her sister's appearance, so this is understandable.

To him, the existence of the woman Umbrella is very important. Ralph finally understood this after she passed away. Ralph entered the research centre at the tender age of fifteen, and met her when practicing. Umbrella was his teacher, and was also a beautiful flower that he could only look at from a distance. When she chose him to be

her assistant, he thought that everything emitted a rosy radiance, and even believed in the presence of God.

However, though Ralph had feelings for her, he did not express his feelings buried in his heart up till the last second. It's because he was clear that his silhouette was not reflected in her amber pupils. The only person in her eyes was the young girl—certification number HRM021-α.

"Pro……fessor?"

The young girl lied on the cold bed, mumbling quietly.

Letting the young girl awaken right now, what meaning does that have for him? Ralph questioned himself. However, his answer was quite obvious. Ralph loves Professor Umbrella, and respects her from the bottom of his heart. That's why he could not abandon the young girl that the Professor loves.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ralph asked in a deep, calm voice.

The young girl opened her pink lips slowly, saying in a small voice "Yes……". Hearing her melodious voice, Ralph couldn't help but think, she's really similar to Professor Umbrella.

"The movement control circuit is still booting. You can move after thirty minutes, so please wait for awhile."

The young girl blinked, nodding slightly.

Then, she said quietly.

"The rain…… stopped……"

When her body was able to move, the young girl raised her upper torso from the bed and inquired.

"Why…… am I here?"

The young girl stared at Ralph with her blue, deep pupils.

That was when Ralph noticed something. Compared with the last time that they met, the color of the girl's pupil had a slight change. The young girl's pupils changed from its

original vibrant sky blue to a strong deep blue, pupils that were beautiful like the blue skies after a hurricane.

“Look at this first.”

Ralph passed a mirror into the girl’s hands. The girl looked at the mirror, showing a perplexed expression. Maroon hair that reached her shoulders, white skin, blue pupils — the mirror reflected the silhouette of the fifteen year old girl Iris Umbrella.

“Then, let me tell you what happened.”

Ralph said while moving a chair to the young girl’s side. After that, he slowly explained what had occurred up till now.

After Professor Umbrella passed away, Ralph was ordered to tidy up the Professor’s belongings. Thus, he found Professor’s ‘will’ from the large amounts of papers and books remaining in the research center. To be exact, the will was only a draft, and seemed uncompleted, and doesn’t even have an envelope. Finding the will was three days after Professor died.

That was when he realized the matter about Iris, and immediately contacted the Umbrella residence, but she was already taken away by the Robots Management Department. Ralph did not think that they would be so quick, and the sudden changes caused him to be flustered.

Ralph immediately started to investigate Iris’s location. However, the Robots Management Department refused to tell him anything about Iris using their obligation of confidentiality as the reason. In the end, he still couldn’t find Iris who had turned into scrap metal.

Three months after Professor passed away, Ralph who temporarily gave up on the matter suddenly learnt about strange news. Someone found a robot collapsed at the Venus Fountain Plaza, and it gave the goddess statue a circlet cigarette case. That was what he heard from his reporter friend Karen Cloudy.

Recalling the contents of the Professor’s will, Ralph started to search for the robot because of his intuition. Lastly, because of his passionate persuasion— and of course, paying a certain amount of money helped— he moved the remains of the robot from the department using disposal as an excuse. Seeing the group photo of Professor and Iris stuck in the cigarette case, Ralph’s intuition came true.

Thus, he finally retrieved Iris' body. Being able to finish the maintenance so quickly, was also because of the 'spare' body that the Professor prepared for Iris.

"……. This is the will that Professor left."

Ralph handed the letter that was kept in a blue envelope to her. She took it with trembling hands, and started to read the letter that starts with 'Dear Iris'.

♠

After some time, Ralph continued.

"…… Professor Umbrella's belongings now belong to you. However, robots having properties isn't acknowledged by law, so the property would be kept under the Oval University Fist Robotic Laboratory. Also……"

After hearing his words, Iris just nodded silently.

She started to sob, tears dripping onto the will in her hands. Seeing her blue eyes that were moist because of tears, Ralph thought, so beautiful.

"That's right, please wait for awhile."

After ending the necessary statements, Ralph stood up from his seat.

When he came back after about five minutes, Iris was already off the bed, leaning onto the wall while wearing a white cloth that was like white curtains. An about one meter wide transparent box was in front of her, and the remains of a robot was in it— her 'previous body', the body that only had a head and a right arm, a body that was like scrap metal.

"Can I…… touch this?"

She asked Ralph somewhat hesitatingly. Ralph pressed a button, opening the transparent box while saying: "Mnn, sure."

As though she was comforting a sleeping child, Iris caressed the cheek of the robot. Then, she bent down, hugging the remains of the robot gently while saying.

"Thanks for your hard work……"

Tears flowed down her fair face, dripping onto the robot's chest.

Ralph looked at her silently. The silhouette of the young girl holding the robot remains seemed rather unrealistic, but was a strange scene that filled people's hearts with sorrow. Three years ago, the time when carried the young girl—HRM021-α to fix her probably had the same feelings.

After Iris reluctantly loosened her arms, Ralph asked.

"That's right…… The thing that I went to fetch just now was this."

A card box stained black because of machine oil was in his hands.

"The card box was in the chest of the 'body' that you just held. There's a map and a cash card under another person's name in it, what is……"

At that moment, Iris' expression changed instantly.

Her blue eyes widened, snatched the card box and opened the cover. A group photo of a young girl of about twelve or thirteen and what seemed to be her parent was stuck in the box.

"Erm!"

She suddenly shouted. Then, she grabbed Ralph's shoulders, approaching his face as though she wanted to kiss him. Ralph asked in surprise: "Wha- what is it?"

"How long did it pass since you took me back!?"

Ralph answered in confusion: "Err…… About two weeks……"

"Two weeks……" Iris tightly held the card box, raising her face that was full of determination.

"I'm off.!"

After shouting that, she opened the door of the room and ran out while being covered in a piece of thin cloth.

Ralph stood blankly without moving, then chased after her quickly, flustered.

♠

I ran out without shoes. Mr. Ralph was shouting something behind me, but his voice is out of my auditory range.

My battery is full. Though the movement control system of my limbs still had some problems, I don't care.

Two weeks passed after that.

—God! Oh, God!

I prayed repeatedly to the goddess statue that looked like Professor. I ran non-stop, rushing forward with a speed of a hundred meters in nine seconds. As though I was going to welcome the arrival of my beloved Professor, I went forward directly. My body was only covered in a white cloth, but I don't care.

The research centre was quite close to the Umbrella residence, and wasn't too far from the fountain plaza where the goddess statue stood as well.

Also, it's quite close to the location where she's at.

While running, I searched for the data of the map of the city. Data of the memory and the map matched quickly. I would be able to find her after running the opposite direction to the drainage system of the fountain plaza.

Finally, I reached the commercial streets. The shopkeeper of the fish shop shouted in surprise: "Eh, Iris!?" I waved to him while smiling, then started to run again.

The goddess statue enlarged in my field of vision. Chatty old men, playing children and couples expressing their love sat on the benches nearby. That was the scene that I liked the most. In front of me would be the remains of the junk parts store. When I think about it, I once used up all my battery here. However, it doesn't matter now. I continued to ran non stop after turning the corner, entering a residential area—

Thus, I finally arrived at 'that house'.

I walked into the courtyard, there was a drain that looked like something was dragged out, the trails that I left here.

Walking into the backyard, torn off tubes were everywhere. Those were a part of my body.

After that, I kneeled on the ground, searching in the bushes while crawling.

I searched nervously.

God.

Ah, God, thank you.

“Lilith……”

The girl was waiting for me while maintaining her original posture with her eyes closed as though she was slumbering.

Iris Rain Umbrella’s Letter

Dear Professor:

Professor wrote a letter for me.

That’s why I’m writing a letter for you as well.

Though I’m saying that, I’m actually writing the notes for the ‘special talk’.

Professor.

First, I’m writing down what made me happy.

Lilith woke up last week.

Ah, Lilith is my new friend.

She’s good at talking, is brave, and is very reliable.

When I found her in the bushes of the courtyard, I heaved a long sigh.

Was that the guidance of the goddess statue? Or was that Professor’s power?

After recovering this body, I realized that the color of her hair is gold. My vision was single colored before this.

The gold haired Lilith is much cuter. However, she still hates to wear a maid costume. I think that it suits her instead.

Professor.

Apart from Lilith, I made a new friend as well.

He's called Volkov.

To protect Lilith and I, he passed away in a battle with the military.

Because of Mr. Ralph's help, we obtained a piece of his black fragment.

A part of Volkov's body was sent to the research centre as investigation information.

Now, Lilith solemnly keeps the fragment of Volkov in her chest.

Professor.

After losing Professor, I didn't know what my meaning of existence is.

However, after I came in contact with the outside world, working frantically, and meeting Lilith and Volkov, though I'm still somewhat confused, I think I found what I need to do.

Professor, do you know the children's literary book 'Third-Rate Demon God Visa Darke'?

The book tells of the stories of the demon god Darke who like to fool around and his magical ring Flo Snow getting into various troubles because of magical tools.

Ah, that's right. Darke is rather similar to Professor. Both of you look cold on first sight, but are actually quite gentle. Darke gave Flo Snow a new ring in the end. Professor gave me a new body as well.

The gentle demon god died before the last volume, while Flo cried in pain for a long time because of his loss. However, as she recovered from her sorrow, she started to challenge new things again. Like what Darke would do in the past, she would collect broken magical tools to fix them, creating a new 'home' for the magical tools that lost

their power. She inherited the deceased Darke's will, and found a new meaning for her existence.

That's why I want to create a 'home' like her. Simply said, it's a 'shelter' for robots. I want to bring the robots who lost their owners, were abandoned, abandoned form the battlefield or those who can't continue to work at construction sites to this mansion. Then, we'll work together and get money. The money earned would be used for the fees of repair and charging.

Mr. Ralph agreed with my idea. He would repair and maintain my functions during his spare time as well. He's a nice person.

After I mentioned the idea of the 'robot shelter' to Lilith, the first thing that she said was "It'll be neverending if things continue, so you better give up". She told me that tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of robots would be abandoned each year, and my actions are just inadequate, wasting time and money.

However, after I put up the advertisement of the shelter, numbers Twenty Eight and Fifty Five— ah, err, those numbers were what my previous colleagues were called, called the Umbrella residence in three days. Lilith who picked up the phone was the most surprised. Number Eighty Six contacted us the day before yesterday as well, and unfamiliar robots came straight to the Umbrella residence yesterday. Since things turned out like this, just let them work here— that was what Lilith decided. She wants to work hard at construction sites to earn money.

I just feel that we would be quite busy.

Do you remember the robot at the junk parts store? The large robot that appeared in the news that went on a rampage at the fountain plaza.

Lilith told me that his name was Lightning o' Milber.

Why did he go on a rampage?

I wanted to know the answer no matter what, so I asked the shopkeepers at the commercial street for this. The grocery store shopkeeper told me this.

The owner of the junk parts store passed away a few days before the robot went on a rampage. The relationship between the robot and its owner was really good as well.

Professor said this, right? The robot might have saw a hallucination.

So, though the assumption might be too blunt, I couldn't help but guess.

The day that he ran over to the plaza, he's probably looking for his owner.

I have experienced his feelings of losing his owner. Whenever I think about Professor now, I would feel an overwhelming loneliness and sorrow, and my chest would tighten. When I'm writing this letter now, my hands are trembling as well.

Then, Professor. Let's stop here.

I'll write to you again next time.

Yours Truly,

Your Iris.

Oh, and

Professor, Professor!

Look outside the windows right now!

It's a really, really beautiful blue sky……

I love warm sunny days like this.

But Professor.

I like rainy days as well.

Why, you ask?

Heh heh, isn't that obvious?

Because I met my beloved Professor on that rainy day.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Matsuyama Takeshi.

'Iris on Rainy Days' is the fourth selected work in the seventeenth Dengeki Novel Prize, and is also my long-awaited new work.

The main character of the story is a robot. The word 'robot' actually originated from the word 'robota' in Czeth, and it means 'forced labor'. From the word 'robot', I imagined — robots are an existence that does labor in place of humans, they are emotionless, painless, and wouldn't complain, so they're convenient tools. Thus, I felt that it would be interesting if I wrote robots into an 'existence similar to a human', and that was why I wrote this book.

Thus, this is a story that started from the point of view of a robot. Though it's somewhat exaggerated to say this, my aim was to write the story with the theme of 'destruction and rebirth'. Though there weren't any grand scenes of giant robots transforming and reforming (The main reason is that I was worried if I could write it well), but if the hopes of the robot to continue to live on could touch everyone's feelings, I would feel quite happy.

This book could only be published with the help of a lot of people.

Tokuda-sama and Tsuchiya-sama from the editorial department, I gave them a lot of trouble during editing. When I received a phone call from the editorial department last fall, I was really happy. And Hirasato-sama who was the illustrator, thank you for drawing such great illustrations. I've kept the first drafts of the drawings on my desk. Besides that, the proofreaders, cover designers and everyone in ASCII Media Works, I express my deepest gratitude.

Besides that, the first readers of Iris the S-couple, the one who gave me information K-senpai, S and Y who took care of me since high school, N and T who celebrated the publishing of the book N and T, my colleagues, junior high, high school and college students and senpais, and my family and relatives who gently took care of me. Thank you so much.

Lastly, to all the readers who picked up the book, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. If people can think 'This reminds me, I've read a book like this before……'

during rainy days, I would be delighted as the author.

Here, I present this book to the person that I've known since high school, sometimes shy, but would become active during gatherings, my late friend—Arai Sao(?).

Matsuyama Takeshi.

Iris on Rainy Days

Ame no Hi no Iris

Author: **Takeshi Matsuyama**

Illustrator: **Hirasato**

Translated by **Zephyrus** & **DNK** (intro)